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MAY, 1959

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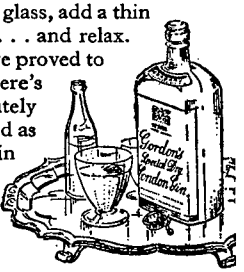

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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

Vol. XX CONTENTS FOR MAY, 1959 No. 5

		Page
Log Book	*Illustrations by Graham*	4
Leave Them Alone	**Hans Ruesch**	7
Night, Youth, Paris! and the Moon	**John Collier**	18
One for the Road		22
Pearl Fever	**Richard Clapperton**	23
Hold Very Tightly	*Illustration by Swavek* *"Fare Stage," from "Selected Stories of Malachi Whitaker," by courtesy of Jonathan Cape; "Bus Stop," by permission of Oxford University Press; "Caught Tripping," by courtesy of George Allen and Unwin; "Back Seat," by permission of the Museum Press; the excerpt from "Prisoner in the Bar," by courtesy of Phoenix House*	38
Ice-cream Suit	**Ray Bradbury**	41
Pemberton Thrush	**H. E. Bates**	59
Mr. Duckworth's Night Out	**Michael Gilbert** *© Mrs. Michael Gilbert* *Illustrations by Ian Garrard* *The poem by George Rostrevor Hamilton from "Collected Poems and Epigrams," by courtesy of William Heinemann*	68
Long White Scar	**Brian Cleeve**	83
Gay Gondola	*Decorations by Karin Williger* *"Romantic," by permission of Macmillan and Company; "Practical," by courtesy of Chapman and Hall; "Ice-cold in Venice," by permission of André Deutsch; the Ogden Nash poem, by permission. Copyright 1958, The New Yorker Magazine Inc.*	96
Deadline	**Christopher Landon**	99
Collector's Item	**Youngman Carter**	107
Tiger of Timbala	**David Walker** *Illustration by Barry Driscoll*	112
Argosy Crossword		144

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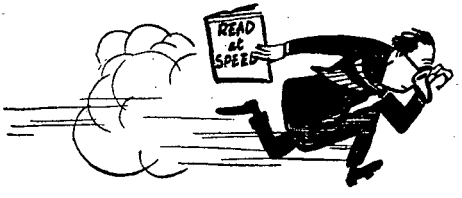
Log Book

HEAVEN preserve us, they've now invented a method of speeding up reading: a famous technical school has apparently instituted a Do-It-Yourself course whereby the slow reader learns to accelerate his word-rate by several hundred w.p.m. It is all done with cards. At the start, an automatic block-system covers up each word as soon as it has been read, to eradicate the naughty habit of glancing back at the preceding sentence. (Well, confess: how many times have you read the top line of this page?)

Later on, readers learn how to pick out the essential words from each sentence and ignore the rest, so that Hamlet's speech would read, "Be, not be, slings, arrows, perchance to dream, rub, bare bodkin, conscience, cowards, sicklied, pale cast of thought." You get the general idea.

The object of the course is to save some of the millions of man-hours wasted daily in toiling through all the documents, memoranda, and forms in triplicate that seem to be necessary to our gracious way of life.

No doubt it is a gladdening thing. Soon we shall be able to digest Proust and Thucydides before breakfast and take in *Gone With the Wind* during the ten minutes' wait for the eight-forty-five. All the same, there's something depressing about the thought; it's like telling a slimmer that he'll be just as happy with an appetite-



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quelling pill as with roast beef, two veg., and treacle tart to follow. It just isn't comparable.

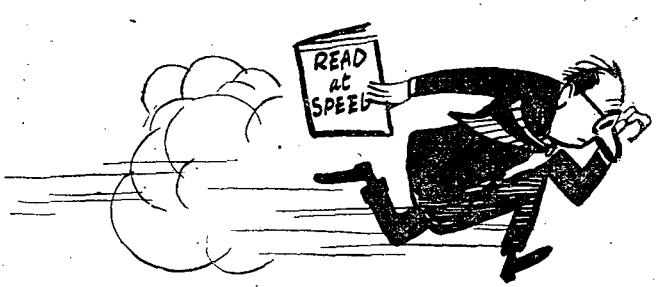
Besides, what will a traveller do on the train journey from Paddington to Land's End if Argosy only lasts him as far as Ealing Broadway? Publishers will have to start printing books on airmail paper, or no commuter will be able to stagger along with sufficient reading-matter for his needs.

We notice, too, that although the course guarantees rapid reading, no promises are made as to whether its graduates will remember what they have whizzed through. It's not much use reading Greek history in the bath if you're left with the impression that the Achaean League will make a poor showing against Tottenham Hotspur.

Anyway, whatever the merits of the course, Old Uncle Horatio and the rest of the staff on Argosy will continue to read slowly and carefully through the hundreds of manuscripts submitted every week, and bon vivant readers will, we hope, continue to take Argosy at a leisurely and enjoyable pace, with pauses for reflection. In fact there's something to be said for a brisk run round the block after each story; it whets your appreciation of the next, and works up a fine appetite for roast beef and two veg. at the end of a Sunday morning read.

Michael Gilbert, as well as Mr. Duckworth, went to town in his new story on page 68, for Mr. Gilbert is an ardent and experienced train traveller. Recently when a Sunday paper mistakenly referred to his feminine namesake and co-crime writer, Anthony Gilbert, as a commuting solicitor, Michael Gilbert was moved to comment reproachfully in a letter to the erring journal:

" On more than one occasion I have noticed a studious, grey-haired gentleman occupying the far corner of the carriage and scribbling industriously in a large black notebook. It had often



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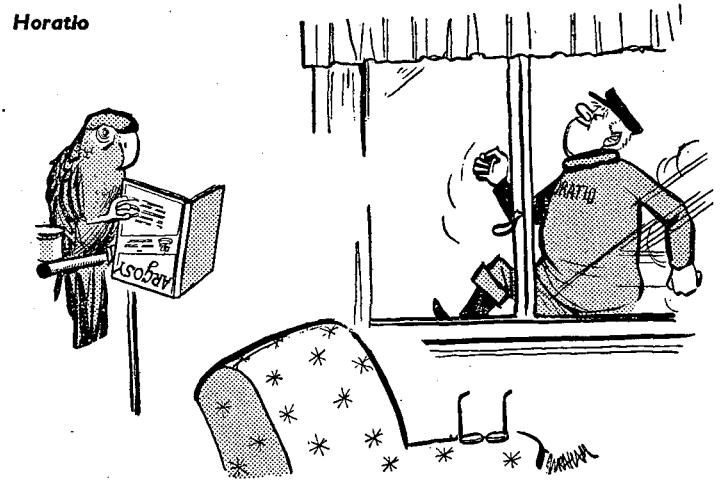
occurred to me to wonder what he was doing. Now that I come to think of it, his eye had, from time to time, a homicidal gleam in it which I used to attribute to the slowness of the train. It never occurred to me that there might, in fact, be two of us doing the same thing at the same time." In an editorial correction the paper acknowledged that Anthony Gilbert was the pen-name of Lucy Malleson, but countered with the fact that her favourite detective is an unscrupulous solicitor named Crook.

David Walker is back this month, tiger connoisseurs will be glad to note, with a monarch of the jungle who is a worthy successor to Harry Black's Bad One. Walker, who says he spent five good, bachelor years in India from 1932, went back there after the war as A.D.C. to Lord Tweedsmuir. Postwar India was very different, he found: independence was on the way, tension was growing. Some of it is reflected in the story.

Christopher Landon recently had the appalling experience of losing, at one fell swoop, all six typed copies of his new novel, in a suitcase which was stolen from his car. He was left with nothing but a manuscript version in his own writing, which only his wife can decipher. S.O.S.! If any reader comes across them, please return, care of Argosy. Landon's caustic comment was that either the thief must have thought the book so good he was passing it round among his friends—or else he thought it so awful that he burnt the lot . . .

JOHN SILVER



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LEAVE THEM ALONE

Sheep don't use skis,
so he never used them either

BY HANS RUESCH

THEY had put him into uniform, slung a rifle and bandoleer over his shoulder, and given him to understand that the only thing that counted now was to do as he was told. But Gani still knew little about soldiering, or else he would never have made that dreadful mistake.

He was somewhat selfconscious about his outfit which he felt he did not entirely deserve, although it was not much of an outfit: the threadbare tunic of shoddy fabric that merrily let in wind and snow; the old Mauser that was no match for modern rifles such as the enemy had. But, being a soldier, he was trying to do his best. That was not much, he thought—just to carry on, enduring blizzards and frost and fire.

It was exactly what he had been doing all his life, except for the shellfire, of course; that was new. He had been carrying on all his life—enduring snowstorms in winter, as Albanian mountain people have to do; enduring the summer heat, while he minded the sheep grazing on the stingy Balkan slopes; carrying on every day of the year without giving the matter a second thought—and perhaps not even a first.

And now he had earned three days' leave. He had saved the life of his commanding officer. The officer had been lying in the snow, his leg shattered, and Gani had left the shelter of the trenches to carry him to safety amid the whizzing bullets. Gani considered three days' leave a generous remuneration for so small a service, for in those three days he would make Sorita his own. Sorita was the most beautiful girl of his mountain village—the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

The officer of the day, upon signing his furlough papers, had looked with pleasure on the young soldier, hefty and stocky and hard-looking, except for his eyes which were sad and wondering like those of a boy; then he cautioned him that leave was for three days only, not one minute more, and wished him luck.

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And considering what was in store for him, Gani needed all the good luck he could get. . .

Soon he would crush Sorita in his arms and break the wonderful news to her. She had promised to be ready for him whenever he came. Only a march of some six hours up to the cabin, and from there a fast dash down to the village in the valley, separated them.

At sunrise, when his leave started, Gani began to plod his way through the freshly-fallen snow, leaving the front lines behind, his only kit his water canteen and his bayonet.

His heart sang with happiness. He was approaching his native heights, a desolate, grimly-beautiful mountain range. A crisp, icy wind blew through the pine trees. The long trudge through the forest, where the snow was not very deep, was nothing to him. And by noon he was in sight of the cabin.

He was only a few minutes from it when there was an abrupt change in the immediate course of events that had seemed so clearly marked out. The gigantic silence of the snow-numbed mountain was interrupted by a strange sound of stirring air and, looking up, he saw a huge aeroplane winging down very low above his head. Before he knew it he had thrown himself headlong into the snow, but he kept his eyes open.

He sensed at once that this was not one of the usual bombing attacks. There was something wrong with the aircraft. The motors were silent, and the glide seemed much too low, haphazard, and unsteady. The plane was making a forced landing.

After brushing the tops of the pine trees it touched ground in a small, sloping clearing. The space was too short and the plane crashed into the woods ahead. But only to Gani's inexperienced eyes did the accident seem serious. The plane hit the tree at low speed, the motors could not backfire and set the craft ablaze because they were dead, and the pilot had jettisoned his bombs long ago, at the first hint of trouble. But the wings were sheared off, scattering débris over hundreds of feet, and this made the crash seem worse than it was.

Here Gani made his first mistake—and in war the first mistake is likely to be the last.

He ran towards the wreckage, forgetting that he was still in a country at war. But he did not consider himself in the war for the next three days. So he neglected to look the plane over carefully, and gave way to his impulse to see whether there was anyone who might be saved.

But without his help, one, two, three, four men climbed out of the craft—pale faces dwarfed by the huge, fur collars of heavy, leather jackets.

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Gani stood watching and wondering what would happen next. And for a while the four airmen also stood speechless and surprised. Then one of them drew a pistol.

Gani felt his knees sag. Only now did he realise the enormity of his blunder. A quick glance at the craft's tail showed him the Italian tricolour. He had not reckoned with the possibility that these men might be enemies. He was so far behind the lines! Now they were training a gun on him and delaying his journey heaven only knew how long, with every hour of his leave counting.

The one with the pistol was the flight officer. He questioned the soldier sharply in broken Albanian.

"How far to the border?"

"Half a day."

The officer cursed, and conferred briefly with his companions. Then he turned to Gani again, "What's in that cabin?"

"I don't know."

"Weren't you on your way to it?"

"No. I was going down to the village."

"You know nothing about the cabin?"

"No."

"Let's have a look at it. You walk ahead."

They threaded their way up to the cabin. They forced the door open, and entered a stuffy, sooty room with little furniture except a table, a stove, and a bunk. The two dusty windows admitted a grey daylight.

After a quick glance round, the four airmen began arguing in their own language, which Gani did not understand.

"Nothing in here for us. Looks like some abandoned shepherd's hut."

"We could have done with some food."

"Look, what's that?"

In a corner stood a tall bundle wrapped in dusty oilcloth. They opened it, and out came several pairs of skis of various woods and sizes.

"You see?" the flight officer said triumphantly. "This is the answer. It's worth more to us than food. We can be down the valley in no time, if you haven't altogether forgotten how to use a pair of boards."

"All right. But what about the soldier?"

"He comes with us. You think he can't ski? Sure he can. Can you ski, soldier?"

The soldier said he could not.

"He looks after sheep, he says," the officer explained. "Sheep don't use skis, he says, so he never thought of using them either."

"I thought every child in the mountains could ski."

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" Every child maybe, but not the adults. These mountain peasants become quite stupid as they grow up."

" This one seems particularly dull-witted."

" He has eyes like a cow."

The navigator had time only for constructive talk.

" Wouldn't it be better," he addressed the flight officer, " to leave here as fast as we can, without burdening ourselves with this lummox? On skis we could make it in no time."

The officer pondered before answering, " We should be faster on skis, but we can't try to cross the border before dark and we'd have to wait here for hours. We will leave now on foot and play safe, taking along this man who knows the lie of the land, which we don't.

" You," he told his navigator, " may be able to locate any speck on the map when you're surrounded by your instruments, but I doubt if you can find your way round a tree without a drift sight. We won't take any chances. Besides, it is a lot better if we return with a prize."

" That's true," another man said. " Looks quite a feat, doesn't it, to return from behind the enemy lines with a prisoner. It might even get us a decoration."

" Even if it's only a big lummox like this man? "

" Of course. A prize lummox, you see."

The officer turned to the prisoner.

" You will lead us to the border." Again he unholstered the pistol. " See this? Now listen closely. We don't know our way here, so you could lead us wherever you want—but at the first glimpse of one of your patrols I'll shoot the brains from under your cap, or whatever you have under it. So you know how to behave. Understand? "

Judging by the expression of dismay that appeared on his face, Gani understood well enough. He understood that it was not merely a matter of not seeing Sorita today or for many days to come, but that things were taking a far worse course. He was going to be captured. He already was. He cursed his leave and the officer who had granted it.

Later on they might even court-martial him—the soldier who had left on three days' leave and never returned. Perhaps he would be declared missing. But it was more likely that in the army files he would figure on the deserters' list. He had heard of many such cases. Tears of anger filled his eyes.

They set out on their way. In the cabin the airmen had eaten up their last bars of chocolate. They did not want to waste time, lest hunger weaken them before crossing the border and oblige them to forage in enemy territory, always a hazardous task.

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The descent down the treeless mountainside was slow and laborious because the snow was deep and the wind keen.

"Are you sure this is the shortest way?" the flight officer asked after a while.

Gani stopped. "It's not the shortest way," he said in his slow manner. "If I go the shortest way, we'll hit our lines. I'm going farther north, to the far edge of the border, where there are fewer troops."

"Is he telling the truth?" one airman asked.

"I believe so," the flight officer said. "We've noticed often enough from the air that there was no movement in that part of the border except for a few patrols. It's too mountainous for large-scale operations." He turned to the soldier. "Go on. Choose the way you want. You know what's best for you now." Again he toyed with his pistol for emphasis. "And get cracking!"

Gani swallowed hard. Hatred was in his heart, hatred such as he had never felt before. And hatred gave him warmth and strength. He marched on, quickening his step. And as he did so his back began to straighten and his eyes lost the bewildered look of a trapped animal.

Late at night they had not yet crossed the border, although Gani had never slackened his pace. The officer had even had to order him repeatedly to slow down or wait because the line was straggling, and he did not want the soldier to be too far ahead of him in the darkness. First one of the airmen, then another, then a third had suggested a rest. The officer was just as tired, but his rank did not allow him to show it. He had insisted that they go on.

Finally even he stopped. He had a haggard look as he addressed his guide. "We can't tramp about all night without food and sleep. And we can't risk falling asleep without shelter, or we'll never wake up. And if *we* can't, you can't. As soon as we cross the border, we'll have what we want, and so will you—food and warm clothes. And you'll be even better off than we, because for you the war will be over. You have nothing to lose. So better make it straight, and make it fast."

"You don't want to meet a patrol, do you? Then follow me. I lead, you follow. I don't want to meet a patrol, either."

The airmen began arguing among themselves. Hunger and fatigue were beginning to affect their tempers. Gani noticed that their voices sounded clipped and irritable.

"I told you so," the navigator was saying bitterly. "Instead of dragging this ballast with us we should have tried to make a dash for it on skis. This man is just giving us the run-around."

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The flight officer turned angrily on Gani. " Perhaps you don't believe that we mean business." He struck him a short, hard blow on the forehead with the butt of his pistol. Gani covered his face with both hands and slowly sagged to his knees. Then he came up again, a thin streak of blood running down his face.

" I know you mean it," he said in a dead voice, without looking at the officer. " I swear to you that I know you mean it."

" Then you know what's good for your health. Get going! "

The night was clear and frosty. The five men were ploughing their way through the deep powder-snow, and with every mile their backs stooped a little more, hunger increased, and their hearts worked with increasing strain—for their strength was rapidly burning out, with nothing to replace lost energy except will-power and determination.

The airmen were used to cold and snow. Freezing temperatures prevailed in their cabin when they flew at twenty thousand feet; and they were young and healthy, because only the flower of youth was good enough for their job.

But now they were without food, and they were not accustomed to that; and they suffered from want of sleep.

They knew that sleep was now the gravest danger, graver than hunger, because it acted more quickly; and lack of food made them an easier prey to sleep. From time to time they flailed their arms to fight off drowsiness and the gripping cold. The temptation to rest for a while was strong; but the instinct of self-preservation was stronger still, and they continued on their way. Sometimes they munched a handful of snow, which tasted of iron and ran down their throats and empty stomachs like an icy thread, or they chewed pine needles, the bitterness of which contracted their gums.

But they never asked themselves how Gani felt. They did not care. That was the first mistake the airmen made.

And in war, the first mistake is likely to be the last.

Daylight came late because it was winter and because they were in the mountains, and when it came the four airmen were almost unrecognisable. Their faces were drawn visibly gaunter in the short span of time. Their lips were split, their eyes small and bloodshot, lashes coated with rime. They stumbled frequently because their knees were unsteady, and whenever they regained their feet their hearts beat hard and fast, and made breathing difficult. By now they hated their prize, in whom they saw the cause of all their troubles.

" I think we've been marching in circles all night," the navigator said. " The landscape looks familiar to me."

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" Pray to God we won't find our own tracks in the snow," Gani was told. " If we do, it will be the last time your boots leave any. Know where we are? "

" All mountains look alike after it has snowed," Gani said with a vague gesture. " It's hard to tell one from another. Let's go up that hill. From there I can find some landmarks to guide us."

The officer paled. " You mean to say that you've actually lost your way? "

" The country looks different at night, especially when there's snow on the ground. I haven't been up here for a long time. But I know I can find the right way from the top of that hill."

The airmen had no choice but to curse and give in. The ascent proved longer and harder than expected. The hill seemed to grow taller and taller while they trudged up its slopes.

Sometimes they hit concealed gullies so filled with snow that they sank in hip deep. At other times the snow was unexpectedly shallow, and they stepped on stones and were forced to tread carefully lest they turn their ankles on the treacherous ground.

They trekked on laboriously, crunching the snow, tottering as they marched, advancing so slowly that they spent the whole day in the climb of what had seemed but a hill. The top had always appeared near, but what had seemed the top turned out to be only a shoulder, and from the shoulder another crest appeared.

When the top was finally reached, night had fallen. From the bleak, wind-swept summit there was nothing to see but darkness, for the sky was now overcast. . .

Gani stood erect with the wind in his face, gazing at the countryside while a fresh day rose tardily. As the mountainous landscape slowly emerged from the gloom of dawn, his eyes—like eyes that look at a flock of sheep—betrayed no emotion or recognition. The mountains looked like a gigantic flock of sheep, each one different, yet all alike to the unknowing eye.

The airmen stood beside him, faces in dejection, faces in pain, faces in anger, driven witless by their impotent rage.

" See anything? " the flight officer snarled.

" Yes." Gani extended an arm. " See that mountain? When we get on the other side of it, you will see the border."

The officer glanced at the rising sun.

" That means changing direction again," he said.

" We had to go east in order to climb this hill," Gani explained.

One man sat down in the snow, resting his head on his hands, his eyelids drooping.

" Get up! " the flight officer shouted. " And on our way! "

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They staggered on, floundering in the snow, often stumbling to their knees, reeling down the slopes, the snow coming up to their belts, melting with the warmth of their clothes, and soaking them. The airmen were lucky to have their heavy, leather jackets, but their light boots were inadequate, neither watertight nor made for this terrain.

Gani was even worse off, but he did not seem to mind, he plodded on relentlessly with a sort of savage pleasure. He had to stop repeatedly so that the others might catch up. Then he would quickly glance over his shoulder at the men who were trailing behind him in heavy silence, surly and morose. They had even stopped flailing their arms . . .

It was in the early afternoon that one man—the navigator—failed to rise from a fall. When the flight officer ordered him up he received no answer. Cursing, he retraced his steps and shook the man.

" Let me rest for just an hour," the navigator implored. He was sitting in the snow, hunched forward, eyes closed, and there was no boldness left in his voice.

" No! " the flight officer shouted, while his other men stood in their tracks in an attitude of weariness and indifference that frightened him. He saw their apathy as a foreboding of doom. Even their instinct of self-preservation seemed to be frozen.

The day before, they had all regarded this trek as just another incident in their log book, one more adventure of war. But without noticing it they had left the realm of adventure and entered deep into the territory of disaster. The question was no longer whether they would regain their own lines or be captured. Now the question was not one of achievement, but of survival.

The flight officer had to summon his men repeatedly before they pulled themselves together and stumbled towards him. They lifted the navigator to his feet, but his eyes remained shut. Then, catching sight of their prisoner who was slowly approaching to help, they loosed their wrath on him, hitting him savagely with their fists. Now, in the face of their own doom, they were ripe for murder. But they were still dimly aware that the soldier was their biggest, their only hope.

" Listen, man," the flight officer breathed heavily. " You're not going to return to your lines as long as this war lasts. Get this into your thick skull. Your only chance to see any of your people again some day is to guide us into our territory, and guide us fast."

Gani's hands trembled as he received the blows with which the officer was underlining his words, but he did not flinch. Instead he answered in a voice that sounded calm, " Follow me. Have

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patience." And without waiting for a reply Gani trudged on.

His captors slogged after him, by now almost too numb to notice their own pains and discomfort, or that darkness was closing in again, that the air was becoming stiller, drier, frostier. They were stumbling slowly into the regions beyond care and sensation. The mountains, like a majestic embodiment of silence, were watching patiently.

The officer of the day was at his desk when Gani reported for duty.

" How was the wedding? " he asked cheerily. " You look as if you had a thousand Arabian nights behind you. And bruises all over your face. Some girl! Congratulations! "

" There was no wedding," Gani said miserably.

The officer became curious, and gradually wormed the complete story out of him.

" Do you know what you're saying? " he asked, half astonished, half incredulous. " They just fell asleep, you say? And you left them there? We must find them! Why didn't you report it at once? We can't leave enemy soldiers rambling about at large on our territory! "

" They're not rambling."

" But they're alive? "

" They may still be alive."

Judging from the officer's excitement, Gani felt that he was in for trouble again. And he had worked so hard to be back before his leave expired! If he had only managed not to mention the story of those airmen . . .

" Where are they? " the officer asked sharply, getting up.

" About three hours from here."

Gani looked so unhappy when told he would have to lead a patrol to the spot at once that he was advised to report to the mess sergeant first, while the patrol was being readied. After gulping down huge quantities of beef stew and coffee he became quite cheery again. He tramped off lustily, answering the harassing questions of the patrol sergeant.

When they arrived at the spot they found the four airmen huddled together against a tree, their fur collars turned up over their colourless faces.

They did not stir when their pistols were taken from them, nor was it possible to shake them to their feet. They had to be carried away on the soldiers' backs . . .

The following morning Gani set out on his leave for the second time. This time the pass he carried in his tunic was good for a fortnight, and his heart was filled with pride over the words of

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praise that had been spoken to him. He had not quite understood wherein lay the alleged greatness of his feat. He had simply come back in time, that was all.

But he had been told it was indeed a feat, bringing in single-handed so handsome a prize—an entire crew of highly-trained airmen. He hadn't captured them, he had argued. However, if they insisted on putting it that way, it was all right with him, especially if that made it possible for him to get to Sorita at last.

He felt the strain of the past days in his bones, but he marched briskly, just the same, for the setbacks of his first expedition had increased his desire for the girl. As he approached the cabin again he caught himself scanning the sky for a plane about to land—and he burst into hearty laughter.

He had grown a good deal wiser in the past few days: if the same thing happened again he would hide in the bushes until all danger was over.

He entered the cabin with soaring spirits. He chose a pair of skis from the bundle that the airmen had left open, stroked the hard palm of his hand over the runners until the wax warmed and smoothed. Then he left the cabin, shutting the entrance as best he could.

Skis on his shoulders, he tramped over the top until the sun-drenched valley beyond opened up before his eyes. His heart beat faster when he spotted the village below—all the little houses clustered round their tiny church, huddling in the snow for warmth.

He adjusted the toe-irons on the skis, making sure that each boot was held solidly in line without the slightest side-play. Then he fitted each heel-spring snugly round the heel, slipping the cable into the farthest hitch, to ensure himself the strongest downhill pull for a fast, straight run. Then he gripped the poles firmly through the loops. He was ready.

For a moment he tarried motionless, gazing at the dazzling valley below and the surrounding mountains, scornful in their majestic silence. He knew that a day would come when he could again graze his sheep on these slopes; perhaps not this coming summer, perhaps not even next summer—but some summer.

And then he would again call his sheep one by one—for he used to know each member of his flock and give each one a name, and each sheep knew its name and came out of the flock when called. Because sometimes sheep are less stupid than humans. Yes, he knew every single sheep by look and name, all three hundred of them and more, just as he knew every mountain and peak and hill, perhaps three hundred of them or more—in winter and in summer, by day and by night.

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He thrust his poles into the snow and, arching his body, pulled away. The skis slid over the snow and pointed downhill, close to each other, exactly parallel, one slightly advanced. As he picked up speed he pressed his knees forward, elastic and supple. His body, tense and balanced and pitched forward, began to manœuvre and swing up and down according to the terrain, the shoulders smoothly starting the turns, the knees safely absorbing the shocks.

He grinned broadly. He felt good. He hardly remembered the hardships of the past days. He felt young. He was strong again. He knew this would be the fastest run from his cabin down to Sorita he had ever made.

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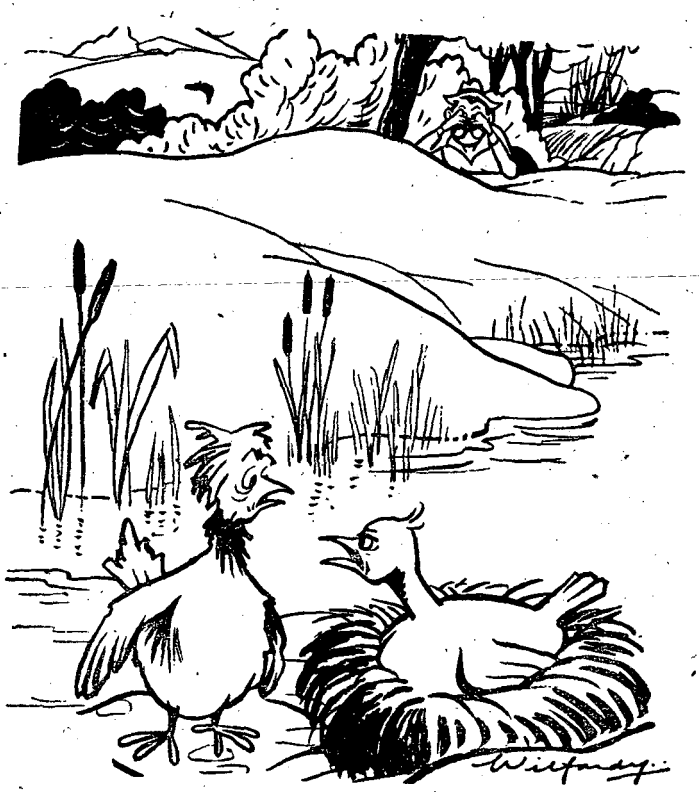

"For goodness' sake spruce yourself up; there's a bird-watcher watching us."

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Night, Youth, PARIS! and the Moon

BY JOHN COLLIER

ANNOYED with the world, I took a large studio in Hampstead. Here I resolved to live in utter aloofness until the world should approach me on its knees, whining its apologies.

The studio was large and high; so was the rent. Fortunately my suit was strongly made, and I had a tireless appetite for herrings.

I lived here happily and frugally, pleased with the vast and shadowy room, and with the absurd little musicians' gallery, on which I set my phonograph a-playing. I approved also of the little kitchen, the bathroom, the tiny garden, and even the damp path, sad with evergreens, that led to the street beyond. I saw no one. My mood was that of a small bomb, but one which had no immediate intention of going off.

Although I had no immediate intention of going off, I was unable to resist buying a large trunk which I saw standing outside a junkshop. I was attracted by its old-fashioned appearance, for I myself hoped to become old-fashioned; by its size, because I am rather small; by its curved lid, for I was always fond of curves, and most of all by a remark on the part of the dealer, who stood picking his nose in the disillusioned doorway of his shop. "A thing like that," said he, "is always useful."

I paid four pounds, and had the large black incubus taken to my studio on a hand-barrow. There I stood it on the little gallery.

This transaction having left me without money, I felt it necessary to sublet my studio. This was a wrench. I telephoned the agents; soon they arranged to bring a client of theirs, one Stewart Musgrave, to inspect my harmless refuge. I agreed, with some reserve. "I propose to absent myself during this inspection. Later you can inform me if my studio is taken."

Later they informed me that my studio was taken. "I will

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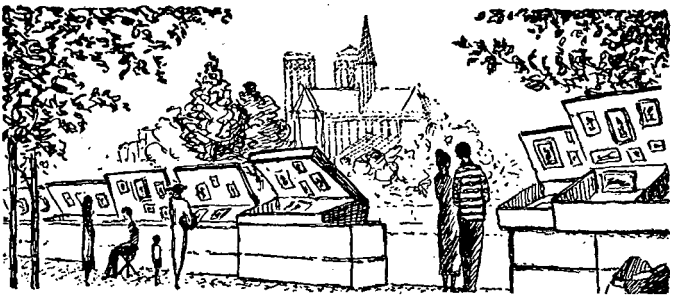

leave," I said, " at four o'clock on Friday. The interloper can come at four-thirty. He will find the key in the door."

Just before four on Friday, I found myself confronted with a problem. On letting one's studio, one locks one's clothes in a press reserved for the purpose. This I did, but was then nude. One has to pack one's trunk. I had a trunk, but nothing to put in it. I had bidden the world farewell. Here was my studio—sublet. There was the world. For practical purposes there is very little else anywhere.

The hour struck. I cut the Gordian knot, crossed the Rubicon, burnt my boats, opened my trunk, and climbed inside. At four-thirty the interloper arrived. With bated breath I looked out through my little air-and-peep-hole. This was a surprise. I had bargained for a young man of no personal attractions. Stewart Musgrave was a young woman of many.

She had a good look round, pulled out every drawer, peeped into every corner. She bounced herself on the big divan-bed. She even came up on to the little useless gallery, leaned over, recited a line or two of Juliet, and then she approached my modest retreat. " I won't open you," she said. " There might be a body in you." I thought this showed a fine instinct. Her complexion was divine.

There is a great deal of interest in watching a handsome young woman who imagines herself to be alone in a large studio. One never knows what she will do next. Often, when lying there alone, I had not known what I would do next. But then I was alone. She, too, thought she was alone, but I knew better. This gave me a sense of mastery, of power. On the other hand, I soon loved her to distraction. The hell of it was, I had a shrewd suspicion she did not love me. How could she?

At night, while she slept in an appealing attitude, I crept downstairs, and into the kitchen, where I cleaned up the crockery, her shoes, and some chicken I found in the ice-box. " There is," she said to a friend, " a pixie in this studio."

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"Leave out some milk," said her friend.

Everything went swimmingly. Nothing could have been more delicate than the unspoken love that grew up between the disillusioned, world-weary poet and the beautiful, young girl-artist, so fresh, so natural, so utterly devoid of selfconsciousness.

On one occasion, I must admit, I tripped over the corner of a rug. "Who is there?" she cried, waking suddenly from a dream of having her etchings lovingly appraised by a connoisseur.

"A mouse," I telepathed squeakingly, standing very still. She sank into sleep again.

She was more rudely put to sleep some days later. She came in, after being absent most of the evening, accompanied by a man to whom I took an immediate dislike. My instinct never fails me; he had not been in the studio half an hour before he gave her occasion to say, "Pray don't!"

"Yes," said he.

"No," said she.

"I must," said he.

"You mustn't," said she.

"I will," said he.

"You won't," said she.

A vestige of refined feeling would have assured him that there was no possibility of happiness between people so at variance on every point. There should be at least some zone of enthusiastic agreement between every couple; for example, the milk. But whatever his feelings were, they were not refined.

"Why did you bring me here?" said he with a sneer.

"To see my etchings," she replied, biting her lip.

"Well, then—"

"I thought you were a customer."

"I am. A tough customer." With that he struck her on the temple. She fell, mute, inanimate, crumpled.

"Damn it!" said he. "I've killed her. I've done her in. I shall swing. Unless—I escape."

I was forced to admire the cold logic of it. It was, momentarily, the poet's unreasoning prostration before the man of action, the worldling.

Quickly he undressed her. "Gosh!" he said. "What a pity I hit so hard!" He flung her over his shoulder, retaining her legs in his grasp. He bore her up the stairs, on to the shadowy balcony. He opened the trunk and thrust her inside.

Here is a fine thing! I thought. Here she is, in her condition, alone with me, in my condition. If she knew she was dead she'd be glad. The thought was bitter.

With the dawn he went for a taxi. The driver came in with

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him; together they bore the trunk to the vehicle waiting outside.

"Strewth, it's heavy!" said the driver. "What yer got in it?"

"Books," said the murderer, with the utmost calm.

If I had thought of saying, "*Paradise Lost*, in two volumes," I should have said it, then and there, and this story would have come to an end. As it was, we were hoisted on to the cab, which drove off in the direction of Victoria.

A jet of cool night air flowed through the air-hole. She, whom I had mourned as dead, inhaled it, and breathed a sigh. Soon she was fully conscious.

"Who are you?" she asked in alarm.

"My name," I said tactfully, "is Emily."

She said, "You are kidding me."

I said, "What is your name?"

She said, "Stewart."

I could not resist the reply, "Then I am Flora Macdonald."

Thus by easy stages I approached the ticklish question of my hitherto hopeless love.

She said, "I would rather die."

I said, "In a sense you have died already. Besides, I am your pixie. Or it may be only a dream, and you could hardly blame yourself for that. Anyway, I expect he will take us to Paris."

"It is true," she said, "that I have always dreamt of a honeymoon in Paris."

"The Paris moon!" I said. "The bookstalls on the quais. The little restaurants on the Left Bank!"

"The Cirque Medrano!" she cried.

"L'Opéra!"

"Le Louvre! Le Petit Palais!"

"Le Bœuf sur le Toit!"

"Darling," she cried, "if it were not so dark, I would show you my etchings, if I had them with me."

We were in absolute raptures; we heard the ticket being taken for Paris. We were registered; it was next door to being married, and we laughed at the rolling of the vessel. Soon, however, we were carried up an endless flight of stairs.

"Mon Dieu, mais que c'est lourd!" gasped the hotel porter. "Qu'est-ce qu'il y a dans cette malle?"

"Des livres," said the murderer, with the utmost sangfroid.

"Paradis Retrouvé, édition complète," I whispered, and was rewarded with a kiss.

Alone, as he thought, with his lifeless victim, the murderer sneered. "H'ya keeping?" said he coarsely, as he approached the trunk.

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He lifted the lid a little, and thrust his head within. A rim ran round inside. While yet he blinked, we seized it, and brought the lid down with a crash.

"La guillotine?" I said cuttingly.

"La Defarge!" observed my adored one, knitting her brows.

"Vive la France!"

We stepped out; we put him inside. I retained his clothes. With a sheet from the bed, the bell rope, and a strip of carpet from before the washstand, she made a fetching Arab lass. Together we slipped out into the street.

Night! Youth! Paris! And the moon!

★ ★ ★

ONE FOR THE ROAD

On your way? Whether you're off for a day on the Downs, or merely en route for the office, here are nine brain-teasers to beguile the bus journey. Have your memory ready! If no change, pass right along to page 143

1. *Lions, we all know, come in prides, but what creatures grouped together form: i. a trip; ii. a mute; iii. a crash; iv. a mob?*
2. *Do stalagmites grow up or down?*
3. *What have these gay gals in common: Pam, Dizzy, Winnie?*
4. *Can you identify the:*
   a. Forties;
   b. Forty-day Road;
   c. Forty-five;
   d. Forty-five Guardsmen;
   e. "Forty-eight."
5. *What is the Remedy of a coin?*
6. *Do you know what is a Gob-fire? the Dead's Part?*
7. *Mimus polyglottus, and Upupa epops—do you recognise these feathered friends?*
8. *Count yourself a first-rate vocabulary if you know the meanings of all these five words:*
   Scrobiculated, scribacious, scalpriform, scansorial, scaphoid.
   (They're all in the Concise Oxford.)
9. *Look at the four following figures, place them in your personal order of preference, then turn to the solutions to see how your choice reflects your psychological make-up.*

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PEARL FEVER

Nothing could make them worth the risk

BY RICHARD CLAPPERTON

AS far as Macdonald was aware, there were two snake temples in the world. One in Penang, Malaya, that most people—most sailors anyway—knew about, with the goat-eating anaconda, and whipsnakes stupefied by constantly-burning incense on the walls. And the other on Phamoun, or Snake Island, north-west of Australia, somewhat similar to the Penang Temple, rich in superstition and dully alive with coiled, potential death. But there was a difference. Snake Island was rich in pearls.

Macdonald told the boys around Breakfast Creek Bay of the close-embedded pearls on the snake boxes, beautifully-writhed reptilian shapes in the image of Phamoun, the Snake God, flickering white and purple by the light of constant fires in the village outside. And as he followed his daily occupation, plying the Queensland coast in a battered salvage lugger, he had dreamt of them secretly for years: he knew just where they were—it was like a reserve account that he had never needed to draw on.

He had not thought seriously of attempting to steal the pearls until that morning in December when his lugger was smashed by a squall on the rocks of Breakfast Creek Bay.

Macdonald had no other means of livelihood, and the urgent need for money for a new boat drove him to make contact with a type of person he didn't normally care for: a man named John Swinnerton.

At that time Swinnerton and his wife were staying at the best hotel in Brisbane. Their photograph had been in the society columns of the Sunday papers; Swinnerton, a company director, was bankrupt—had fled, sneered some, with his last million, his last yacht, and his latest wife.

It was the yacht, a trim, bone-white craft, that was of interest to Macdonald. And Swinnerton, he guessed, needed money as much as he did. He decided to call at his hotel.

When Swinnerton came down the hotel stairs in answer to Macdonald's call, he was wearing a Harris tweed jacket and well-cut fawn trousers; a red handkerchief with white spots flowered out of his top pocket. He was a small, petulant-featured

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man of about forty-six; his voice sharp, his diction uncomfortably luxurious like an actor's.

"Wish to see me?" he said, looking blankly at Macdonald's sweat-stained khaki shirt.

Macdonald was a contrast to the little man: he was ten years younger than Swinnerton, but far more experienced; only his eyes, Chinese-blue, quick as a cat, seemed young.

"Yes. . ." Macdonald coughed hesitantly and said, "I read the papers, I see you're in trouble. Think I've got something might interest you."

"Indeed?" Swinnerton said coldly. But he listened, and when Macdonald had finished he pursed his lips.

He was interested all right. "Of course, it sounds a bit risky," he said. "But I'm not above picking up a few pounds here and there, you know. Besides, there's nothing else to do in this godforsaken hole. Matter of fact, I—" He broke off, hearing a light footstep on the stairs. He twisted round and looked up; then turned back abruptly. "My wife," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Kay, this is Mr. Macdonald."

"No, don't get up," Kay Swinnerton smiled as she came to join them.

But Macdonald rose respectfully, and he was aware as he towered over her of the fragrance of the scent she was wearing. And when he took her hand he felt awkward; it was like holding a young bird. She wasn't the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but she knew how to dress, and her eyes were intelligent and humorous.

They sat down and, at Swinnerton's request, Macdonald explained everything to her. Her smile vanished when the pearls were mentioned.

"But do you mean to try to steal them?" she said. "And here was I, thinking my husband had actually found a friend! I suppose it's already been decided to use my yacht? Oh yes—" she smiled again at Macdonald's surprise—"it's mine, in my name. You see, once upon a time my husband was quite generous, and—"

"That's enough," Swinnerton said.

Kay glanced at him, then paused, gazing at her hands. "But it's a lovely yacht, Mr. Macdonald. You'll enjoy the trip, if nothing else."

She was taller than her husband, and that perhaps helped to convey the impression that she was slightly contemptuous of him. Though he watched them closely, Macdonald observed nothing of marital content, and heard only the clipped tones of dispassionate co-existence.

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It was none of Macdonald's business what shape their marriage was in—he wanted the yacht, that was all—but, on the Saturday morning when they sailed out of Breakfast Creek Bay, he wondered why their disharmony was so obvious.

The bitter impetus stemmed almost entirely from Kay. Was it, he wondered, for his benefit? There seemed a telepathic difference between the polite smile and the intimate one, and he wasn't quite sure which she intended. Her smile reached over to him, penetrating, incisive.

She was cool, he thought. Cool as marble.

Snake Island, with its azure mountains and banks of bright Sumatran green, rose like the top of an eyeless head out of the sea. In the dome of blue sky the Pacific noon sun burnt white in its hammering quiet, and the breadfruit trees moved, soundless and slow, beyond the beach.

Standing well forward in the speeding launch, Swinnerton squinted through a pair of binoculars. His face was already crab-red and crusted from the sun; now and then he wiped the perspiration from his eyes, but nothing distracted his gaze from the island.

At the stern of the launch, Macdonald rolled a cigarette. The sun made no difference to him, except that his eyes narrowed and his lips curled a little. He rubbed the tobacco between thumb and forefinger, and then glanced across, watching Kay. She was wearing a pink-and-white blouse and black jeans, and had put her hair up under a wide-brimmed, white hat.

"I'm beginning to loathe it already," she said, touching her throat near the top of her blouse and frowning at her damp fingers.

Swinnerton dabbed his jowls with the red handkerchief, squinted at the sky, and then said, "Well, it's worth the discomfort. A few thousand isn't to be despised. It's not as if we were stealing: these savages probably have no sense of values, anyway. Wouldn't you say so, Macdonald?"

Macdonald didn't answer, and Swinnerton went on, "You have to make money work for you—it's not much use their leaving it in a temple filled with snakes, and praying to it."

Macdonald grimaced sardonically at Kay, whose mouth twitched wryly in return. That had been Swinnerton's attitude all the way from Brisbane. So far as Swinnerton was concerned, the weather was too damned hot; the natives, whom he hadn't seen yet, were ignorant barbarians. But he was prepared to admit that his own time was being gainfully employed.

Swinnerton focused the binoculars on the island again, and Macdonald said to Kay, "Whether he's right or not, that's the

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way we have to look at it. I mean, if the natives don't sell the pearls, what good are they?"

Kay said sharply, "You won't convince me of that. This is robbery, and you know it."

Presently Macdonald cut the motor before the launch ploughed into the sand, jumped out, and pulled it past deep water; then helped Kay off. The beach was hot and quiet.

Swinnerton lifted out a medical kit, a water-bottle, and a rifle with telescopic sights; then a canvas bag containing two bottles of whisky and one of gin. He draped the binoculars round his neck, and checked everything quickly. "That's all we need, is it? Let's go, then."

He walked up the beach, humourless, unemotional, efficient as a new jack-knife. What the hell, Macdonald wondered, had Kay ever seen in him?

Suddenly Swinnerton stopped; his hand touched the rifle. The trees seemed to shiver: the branches were suddenly alive with people, who came running, slithering down the sandy slope towards them. Swinnerton unslung the rifle.

Macdonald said quietly, "Don't."

There were about fifty people on the beach: probably, Macdonald guessed, the entire population of the island, dressed in what appeared to be black, feathered tunics and white head-plumes; they were light-skinned, their eyes strangely clear, like Siamese cats'. They were unarmed.

A young man stepped in front of Macdonald.

"You from Government?" he asked, leaning sideways, scratching his leg. He was about twenty years old, small and stocky, with a flat nose, wide aboriginal eyes, and white teeth. He blinked doubtfully at the rifle in Swinnerton's hands.

Macdonald laughed. "No. My friends have come over from Danao Island. They had heard so much about the Temple of Snakes. You won't remember me, you'd be too young; I was here in the war. Who was here then? Chanyah, was it?"

"Chahanyah," the boy corrected. "Chahanyah long time dead."

Reassured as to their mission, he grinned at Kay and Swinnerton. "You come see Temple of Snakes? You seen the one in Penang? Well, this one the same, but more old, more beautiful, and—" he added with dark pride—"more dangerous. We don't milk the snakes. But you come," he said, "and you see the village first, eh?" He turned and led them up the slope to the trees. His name, he said, was Phangkat. He was the chief now.

The dwellings in Snake Island village were dug in and stepped out from the mountains like machine-gun nests, roofed with

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corrugated iron sheets on bases of salmon-coloured mud, so that when it rained the water flowed from roof to roof over the dwellings. At the far end of the village, the clearing narrowed to a path and disappeared into the jungle.

Swinnerton stared at it a moment, then turned to Phangkat. "That leads to the temple, I suppose?"

Phangkat nodded eagerly. "You wan' see it now?"

"Well, what do you say, Macdonald, we could—" At the warning expression on Macdonald's face, Swinnerton broke off and asked to see the rest of the village.

Later, Phangkat showed them to a corrugated hut on the edge of the clearing. When they were alone with Kay, Swinnerton glared at Macdonald. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Scared all of a sudden? He was going to show us the temple. We could have got rid of him, helped ourselves, and been away by dawn!"

"You fool." Macdonald crushed out his cigarette on the dusty floor of the hut and turned on him. "I'll tell you this just once, Swinnerton: this business requires patience. We are not going to rush in, grab what we see, and get out; and above all, there will be no killing. I'll do the talking and I'll decide the right moment, d'you hear? We'll look at it in the morning and say our oohs and aahs like ordinary tourists."

"But what the hell for?"

"I'll tell you what for: because if you get caught pinching anything here you won't be arrested by any nice policeman. You'll be dragged by the hair into that clearing, and either hacked to death or thrown into a pit with a black mamba for company—that's what for! And they don't exclude women, so you might spare a thought for your wife."

Kay looked up at him from the floor, where she was unpacking her rucksack. "Don't expect a mere detail like that to impress him," she said.

Swinnerton bent down and impatiently jerked a bottle of whisky out of the canvas bag. "You're exaggerating," he said. "You only have to use common sense. Any fool could see we're fully armed; and as for that mob of savages, we could mow them down in three seconds."

"Once and for all—" Macdonald took a deep breath—"will you get it out of your head that these people are stupid? Do you know what's in the temple?"

"Snakes—a lot of stupefied snakes."

"But what kind of snakes? Anacondas, boas, pythons, kraits, mambas, and heaven knows what else, and they don't milk them, either. You put your hand in the wrong place and you're dead."

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Sneering, Swinnerton opened the bottle and tipped it to his lips. " And I thought I had an experienced man."

You just couldn't tell Swinnerton anything.

The next morning when they visited the temple in the early sunlight the entrance seemed like an old man's face squinting through the tangle of vines and greenery: an old, yellow face lipped with crumbling steps; eyed with barren windows; browed with cracks running like furrowed wrinkles from one end to the other. Parts of the walls were damaged here and there by the rains, and chipped by Japanese bullets; but the temple was immeasurably old, according to Phangkat.

In the dim interior, burning incense hung in the quiet gloom like thick, purple smoke. Then, as their eyes gradually became accustomed to the strange light, they saw the snakes.

It was exactly as Macdonald remembered. Time-discoloured, clay boxes about three feet by two, with rich ferns growing from them, stood like coffins on raised trestles down the full length of the temple, and were placed at short intervals along the walls. In spite of the incense, the pervading smell was of decay and dust, and some other nameless thing; like the smell, thought Macdonald, of the back streets of Singapore.

All the snakes were silent. They seemed to be watching. Most of them, from the Indian krait to the African mamba, were deadly. To be aware of their presence was to be aware of death in a terrible and lonely form. Even contemplation of such a death made Kay shudder. . .

When she saw the anaconda she screamed. She was pointing at a long bamboo cage that ranged almost the full length of the temple. The end nearest to them was fastened shut with a wooden bar, and behind the bar a pair of black, lidless eyes watched them: the head dragonish, hideous.

" Must be a hundred feet long," breathed Swinnerton.

Macdonald smiled thinly at the exaggeration.

Phangkat said, " You wish to see him fed? "

At feeding time, he said, a young, live goat was pushed into the cage. The anaconda swallowed it whole. You could, Macdonald remembered, see the shape of the goat in the snake's belly; watch the snake masticating slowly.

" You don't want to see it," he said to Kay.

Swinnerton asked, " What's the incense for? "

" Makes the snakes sleepy," said Phangkat. " They not bother to bite when they sleep like that."

" Would they bite you if you touched them? "

" Prob'ly."

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"If I got bitten, could you cure me?"

"It depend. If you bitten by black snake or tree snake, cure perhaps. But if you bitten by mamba or cobra, or one of those kraits, it depend on time, how fast you can rid of poison. Old Chahanyah, he bitten many times."

"I see." Swinnerton glanced meaningly at Macdonald. "I suppose they're a sort of guard over the pearls?"

"Oh . . ." Phangkat thought a moment, scratched his head. "No, we don' guard pearls. They just ornaments. Nobody try steal 'em. Anyway," he grinned, "they on green mamba's box. See." He led them to one of the clay boxes under a window. "Pearls on this one."

Green plants grew in wild profusion. In one or two of the other boxes they could see the snakes asleep on the sand at the bottom. The surface of the green mamba's box was purple-white with pearls, exactly as Macdonald remembered them, set close together in the clay.

"Lord," Swinnerton whispered, "there are thousands of them."

And this time, Macdonald realised, he wasn't exaggerating.

When they returned to the hut, Swinnerton got out the whisky and, after offering it to them and being coldly refused, swigged at the bottle. They were silent for some time, eyeing each other, trying to guess each other's thoughts.

Then Kay turned on her husband. "This whole thing's madness," she said. "Those horrible, slimy brutes. ... You'd never come out alive."

Swinnerton grinned vaguely and slapped the bottle. "What's the matter? You scared, too? You heard what that chap said. They're stupefied, those snakes, harmless if we don't touch 'em. So stop worrying."

Macdonald explained, "What we're going to do is this. We have to get the mamba out of that box. We'll put it in another; and I'll need a strong stick—I've handled this type of brute before and I know. After that, we knock the box to pieces. It'll be like picking almonds from a cake. And then we go out. Instead of coming back through the village, we skirt up the mountain path and return to the beach that way. You go down earlier and stay by the launch, ready to take off. That's all there is to it."

"Satisfied?" Swinnerton sneered.

Kay said quietly, "I'd much rather you took my yacht and sold it than got the money this way."

"Why don't you be a good girl and shut up?" Swinnerton lolled against the hut wall; the bottle in his hand. "You think

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I came here just to run away? You think I didn't anticipate danger? I've got everything." He gestured to the medical equipment. "Even if one of those damned things did bite me, I could still treat myself on the way back. Besides," he added, "you wouldn't care to go on being the wife of a bankrupt, would you?"

"If those pearls were worth millions," Kay said calmly, "they wouldn't be worth the risk you're taking."

She turned. "And I thought you would have realised that, Mr. Macdonald."

"Don't listen to her." Swinnerton smacked the cork back in the bottle and shoved it in the bag. "I need the money to get my company on its feet and you want a new boat—we both need money. We can't stop now. So shut up, both of you."

Kay made an obvious effort to control her temper. "When are you going to do it?"

"Tonight. No sense in wasting time, eh, Macdonald?" He laughed, then paused. "By the way, I should mention that if your concern for my health compels you to tell that young fellow about us, our lives won't be worth sixpence."

"You're damned right there," Macdonald said.

He stood up, hooked his thumbs into his belt, and drummed his fingers on his stomach, watching them. They'll be at each other's throats in a minute, he thought.

"I think I'll take a walk before I sleep," he said.

"Do you mind if I come?" Kay asked.

They walked quietly along the sand path towards the temple, and he knew she wanted to talk.

He struck a match and held the flame to her cigarette, and her eyes looked into his: brown eyes, haloed with the glow of her skin and witchlike mascara.

She said, "I'm disappointed in you. I thought you had some sense. You can see what he's like. Why didn't you call the whole thing off?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He was so aware of her nearness that the words he knew he must say were stifled. "Look," he said finally, "nobody's going to get hurt. It's exactly as Phangkat said: the snakes are so stupefied with incense that they're completely harmless. Why can't you accept the fact?"

"That isn't what I meant," she said. "Can't you see the type of mind that husband of mine has?" She came closer. "Can't you understand that if a snake doesn't kill you, *he* might?"

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"That surprises you, doesn't it?" she went on. "It surprised me, too, at first. I'm not saying that he has ever taken a life: it would be difficult to do that in London and get away with it. But, as you pointed out to him, there are no police here. And he's probably pondering that fact right now. If you think he'd share anything with you when he can avoid it, you—" She stopped and demanded suddenly, "Don't you believe me?"

"No." Macdonald smiled at her. "I just think you're exaggerating. He seems to me impatient, a bit superior, and a bloody fool, but harmless enough . . ."

Kay's fingers gripped his forearms. "If you believe that," she whispered, "I may never see you again."

"For Pete's sake!" Macdonald almost laughed. "How can you know?"

"Because I know *him*! How do you think people like that get on in the world? How do you think he made a fortune in the first place? By cheating, fast-dealing, exploitation, juggling company books, swindling . . .

"What I'm trying to tell you is that on an insignificant island like this, there is little difference between swindling and cold-blooded murder."

"Kay, why did you marry him?"

"Because I was young, and I was a snob. I thought he could provide the luxury I wanted, so I persuaded myself that I loved him. He married me because I look good on his arm and in the society columns of the Sunday papers. And you see the result."

"But why live with him?"

"Why? Because, having married him, I felt I had to stand by his side to see that he did as little damage as possible. To warn people who dealt with him, small business people whom he'd crush if he got the chance—and people who—" her fingernails dug into his arms—"people like you, Mac, who think too well of everybody. I want you to be safe, I want you to have everything and be happy because . . ."

She shook her head and put a hand over her eyes. "Oh, Mac, I'm a fool; I think I'm a little in love with you." Her voice was muffled, afraid of what he might answer.

Macdonald was silent a moment. Then he nodded, staring at the trees; his fingers absently stroked her hair.

"I began to love you," he said quietly, "when you first said you hated this business. I'm in this thing, Kay, because I need the money: I have no boat, and without a boat I just don't eat. So I decided to steal, and this place seemed the best bet. But I don't kid myself that this isn't crime. And I'd hate you to think otherwise."

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They remained silent, listening to the wind in the trees.

" But you're still going through with it? " she said, lifting her head.

He nodded, and kissed her. " I don't need looking after as much as you think," he said. " Let's get back. I must have some sleep before we start."

Several hours later, when he woke, he was still tired. On the far side of the hut, Kay was already awake, sitting, chin in hand, watching him. She smiled.

He said, " Where's Swinnerton? "

She shrugged. " Outside, I expect. He's human."

" How long's he been gone? "

" I don't know, I've been asleep."

Macdonald got up and went out.

There were some peepul trees a few yards from the hut where one might have stopped had one been attending to nature. There was no sign of Swinnerton.

He went back to the hut. Swinnerton's things, the canvas bag, the revolver, and rifle were gone, an empty whisky bottle lay near the entrance. He kicked it out of the hut.

" Where are you going, Mac? " Kay said.

" You stay here," Macdonald ordered.

She heard his voice faintly over his shoulder. " The damned fool," he said, and his feet moved swiftly through the long yellow grass.

The temple entrance seemed filled with a damp smell like that of a deserted vault. A wall of ferns grew over the ancient door, and he couldn't see inside. He was going to shout, then changed his mind. The natives would hear. Swinnerton had the gun; he would hear, too.

He stepped inside cautiously, and whispered, " Swinnerton."

He heard a rustling sound. The anaconda moving. Then little sounds: whistling, whipping sounds, slapping leaves, the wind. He sensed a thousand black eyes watching him, and those of the anaconda, lidless, baleful, in the cage.

" Swinnerton, you bastard," he repeated very softly. No answer. There were two aisles between three rows of boxes. He tried to remember where they were. His foot touched a box. Something rustled. Down, you brute, he thought. His face was wet and cold.

" Swinnerton . . ."

Like a sudden shaft of daylight, Swinnerton's torch caught him. He realised Swinnerton was standing halfway to the anaconda's cage.

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Macdonald stared, trying to penetrate the hurtful glare.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said. "Are you drunk? Put out that light."

From behind the torch came long, shivering breaths, as though Swinnerton was sobbing. Macdonald squinted helplessly at the light. He's wondering whether to shoot, he thought. Pretend everything's O.K.—that's the best way. He moved nearer.

"Now look, Swinnerton . . ."

Swinnerton misconstrued the move. He fired, and Macdonald found himself on the floor, listening, aware only of the pain in his shattered arm.

Then a scream. It was Kay.

"Watch those boxes!" Macdonald whispered. "Keep down!"

The torch was out, and she stumbled towards his voice in the dark; he kept silent, realising he might aid Swinnerton's sense of direction.

Kay's hands touched his face, but he pushed her away. "Keep down," he said. "He'd kill even you."

The rustling sounds increased. Could they get out? he wondered. Could you tell a snake's presence by sound alone?

He heard a massive, shifting noise behind him as the anaconda moved and concertina'd restlessly. Swinnerton was silent, but his presence was hard and real as the revolver in his hand—and Macdonald realised with horror that he had the rifle, too.

Without lifting his head, Macdonald called, "Swinnerton, will you listen?" Immediately the revolver roared, and a bullet splatted through one of the soft clay boxes.

After the shot they could hear Swinnerton's breathing: the same shivering, frightened breaths. Macdonald's fingers were on the back of Kay's neck, shielding her head.

Then out of the night came faraway murmurs of curiosity, growing nearer, with a cracking of twigs and slapping of leaves, till the roar of voices surrounded the temple and torches flickered dully on the walls. Macdonald gripped Kay's hand and looked round desperately, but there was no way of escape for her.

Then he saw Phangkat.

The young chief stood uneasily in the entrance, listening. He knew who was in there, he'd heard the shot, and he was obviously afraid.

"Mac Donal'?" he called.

Macdonald raised himself on one elbow.

"Get down, you fool! You'll be killed! Swinnerton's run amok with a gun."

Phangkat jumped nervously at the warning and stared in the

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direction of Macdonald's voice. Then he scowled and beckoned to someone outside. A man ran up the steps. Another followed him. They were talking in low voices, when Macdonald heard what he feared to hear—yet was waiting for—the ear-punching roar of Swinnerton's rifle.

A man yelled and dropped from sight. The other disappeared down the steps. Phangkat crouched quickly, screening himself behind the green ferns as shouts went up from the crowd outside. Phangkat yelled something, presumably, Macdonald thought, to stop them rushing into the temple; then he whispered, "What are you doing, Mac Donal'?"

"Get out while you can, boy," Macdonald said quietly. "He'll kill you."

"No," Phangkat said. "We kill him."

He ran to the entrance and a bullet blasted plaster chips off the wall behind him. Macdonald heard the bolt snapped back on Swinnerton's rifle, his harsh breathing.

"He's got boxes of ammo," he said. "He could keep this up for hours."

Kay said, "Perhaps if I tried to reason with him . . ."

"No use. He has nothing to lose now. They'll kill him if they can."

Swinnerton knew it, but his voice came coolly out of the dark, "You're hit, Macdonald, isn't that right? Otherwise you would have made a dash for the door by now." His footsteps sounded on the soft floor. He was approaching. He wasn't bumping into anything, he'd seen the place by torchlight and knew his way.

What the hell was Phangkat doing? Macdonald wondered.

Kay touched his hand. "Can you crawl? We can get round to the other side. He'll find us in a minute." She placed her hands under Macdonald's armpits. "You must try."

He started to crawl, lying sideways, putting all pressure on his left forearm, his right arm lying across his chest. Now and then, when he forgot and was tempted to use his right hand for balance, he almost screamed with pain.

Kay sensed his agony, and when a thin, soundless cry came from his tight lips, she kissed him swiftly, without relaxing her hold on him.

They were lying behind the left aisle of boxes when Swinnerton reached the spot where they had been. The boxes were raised on short trestles and they saw his feet, twin blotches in the dimness below the trestles.

Macdonald lay on his back, his head turned aside, eyes strained, listening hard. The top of the box was inches from his face. He stiffened once, when he heard a rustling noise among the ferns,

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and in a moment of fear he imagined a snake crawling with slimy ease over the top of the box, and he almost preferred to be shot —But the noise was Swinnerton's rifle, poking among the leaves.

The muzzle was suddenly very near his eyes, and Swinnerton's fear-crazed demand, "Where are you? Where are you?" sounded in his ears before the rifle was withdrawn. Then Swinnerton was moving on again, down the length of the anaconda's cage. The anaconda, sensing his proximity, shifted restlessly.

Macdonald peered over the box. He heard Swinnerton at the entrance; presumably he was searching among the ferns there. It would take him thirty seconds to rush back if he saw them, so they were safe for the time being. There was nothing to do at present, no sense in changing position. Macdonald lay back, his hand protectively on Kay's shoulder.

He was wondering again about Phangkat when he became aware of movement at a window. The window was above the anaconda's cage, a dark square. Though he hadn't been looking directly at it, he knew that someone was crouched on the ledge, because the square was blocked out. He could see a rope dangling against the window, like a guitar string; and then it became obvious that someone was shinning down it.

But Swinnerton sensed it, too; and the next second his rifle boomed with a scattering of echoes, then boomed again; and the man on the rope dropped on to the anaconda's cage—but lightly, he was unhurt—and immediately seemed to disappear.

Macdonald saw the rope hanging slantwise across the window and his breath shortened when he guessed what was happening. The rope was tied to one end of the anaconda's cage. They would open the front of the cage where its head lay; then lift it, so that when it dangled against the wall the brute would be forced to crawl out. In the dark, it would probably kill the first living thing with which it came in contact.

And the only *moving* thing here was Swinnerton.

He could either stay and face the anaconda, or rush outside to the natives. Either way, he was sure to die horribly.

There was a sound of creaking bamboo. The rope-climber was on top of the anaconda's cage again. The rope tautened against the window and he was climbing, when Swinnerton's rifle flashed and cracked from the ferns and caught the climber in the leg. The rope loosened immediately; there was the crash of his body hitting the ground, and of a box overturning. Then a scream. Macdonald recognised the scream as Phangkat's.

It was followed by silence—and hissing.

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Swinnerton was coming back from the entrance, re-loading as he ran. They heard him lumbering past the anaconda's cage, his rifle knocking against the bamboo. Then he stopped.

He was standing near the centre of the cage, when the silence was suddenly broken by a yell from Phangkat who was lying, propped up on his elbows, near the cage. It carried no pain, but a fanatic urgency. And when Macdonald peered at the window he realised it was a command; for the rope, taut once more, was pulling the anaconda's cage up by one end. And while its occupant writhed in alarm, Swinnerton shouted in a frightened voice, "What are you doing? What is it?" He was going to shout again when the cage struck his back, throwing him forward. He stumbled on to the box that screened Macdonald.

Macdonald was startled and sickened to feel the man's breath in his ear, crying, "Oh! Oh!" and then a retching sound. "Oh my God! It's bitten me! It's b—" A fierce, slapping sound came from the box.

When Swinnerton fell back, Macdonald saw the snake's head. At the same instant he felt the pearls under his fingers and realised it was the mamba's box. He rolled over, dragging Kay with him, just as the roof seemed to fall in.

The anaconda, concertina'd in its cage halfway up the wall, straightened and shot down like a long bale of black cloth. When it reached the floor, it whipped itself round into coils. Then its head moved over the floor, low, rigid, watching, sensing the other things present; watching *them*, he thought. But they were not the only ones. You could dismiss Swinnerton—he was probably dead by now—but there was Phangkat.

"Stay here," Macdonald told Kay.

On the other side of the box, his feet touched Swinnerton's body. Maybe he was alive, Macdonald thought, but it was too late to do anything for him now. He picked up the rifle. It was almost dawn. The square of the window was lightening.

The anaconda was lying beside the broken cage. Coiled up, it seemed smaller. It watched him, soundlessly. Its head was still. He lifted the rifle, then stiffened when he saw Phangkat.

Phangkat was lying on his back, his legs spreadeagled under the anaconda's tail, his arms straight by his sides. He seemed unconscious, but the next second he lifted his head slightly, then lay back and relaxed so slowly that the movement was imperceptible. He had guts, Macdonald thought.

He shifted slowly sideways and raised the rifle with his right hand. His arm shivered, weakened with the exertion. He lowered it. He had to shoot at the head, which was five yards away. He began, with carefully slow movements, to sit on the

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floor. First he knelt on his left knee, then his right, put his right hand on the floor, and eased down on to his hip. Then he raised his left leg, rested the barrel along it so that the sight was against the left side of his boot. His finger took first pressure on the trigger, then relaxed. The brute's head was moving again.

He held the rifle pointed at the head, moved his leg to follow its weaving movement, then fired. The head darted forward and fell two feet from him. The rest of the body twirled and humped convulsively, as if the head was nailed to the floor. Phangkat writhed away from the coils before it collapsed, lifeless.

"Help me get him out," Macdonald called.

Swinnerton was dead. They buried him at the foot of the mountain; a crude, unsacred affair which Kay did not attend. When they returned to the village, she was sitting with Phangkat outside his hut. She had bandaged the chief's leg with strips of a spare blouse from the launch.

Macdonald squatted beside him.

"How's it feel?"

They knew Phangkat was suspicious. He hadn't accepted Macdonald's story that Swinnerton had been on a drunken rampage. But there was no proof to the contrary, and, with the pearls intact, there seemed no point in pursuing the matter.

Phangkat shrugged. "He was bad man, that Swinnerton," was all he said. Then he squinted at Macdonald. "You wan' some pearls, then? I give you some pearls; O.K.?"

Macdonald shook his head. "We don't want anything."

"Take them, Mac," Kay said, gazing into Phangkat's eyes. "You saved Phangkat's life, and that is worth something."

"As a souvenir, then," Macdonald grinned as Phangkat sent a servant to the temple. "Although," he said, "that yacht of yours will bring the price of two luggers."

So Macdonald got another boat, and he also had Kay Swinnerton. The only bad thing about it was that when he looked at his new boat he was reminded of how he had tried to steal to get it. And when the boys around Breakfast Creek Bay asked him about the Snake Island of Phamoun, he said, "I don't know anything about it." For it wasn't a dream island any more: it was a nightmare—best forgotten.

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* * *

BOLTS AND BARS

Many a chequered career ends in a striped suit.

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Hold Very TIGHTLY

Face the driver, raise your hand,
You'll find that he will understand.

London Passenger Transport Board Slogan

He'll understand all right, the cuss,
But will he stop the blooming bus?

Passenger's Reply

The Bus, the Bus, the Omnibus!
That welcomes all without a fuss;
And wafts us on, with joyous sound,
Through crowded streets on our busy round,
Stow'd snug in thee! Stow'd snug in thee!
I am where I would wish to be,
While the rain above the mud below
Affect me not where'er I go—

Though the sleet and the slush be ankle deep,
What matters? while I can ride so cheap!
I love, oh how I love to ride
In cosy converse, side by side,
With some sweet sly enchanting one,
Who lets her little 'larum run . . .
Henceforth I'll know the terrible bore
Of padding the hoof no more, no more.

*Ballad of the Omnibus, c.*1835

Fare Stage

" You see where those buses are coming round that corner . . ."

Yes, she saw them, like a great fleet of red galleons bending with the wind and waves, like gorgeous, dressed-up women walking down the steps at the end of a pantomime, like covered

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wagons dashing across a film prairie. You knew there were only so many, yet they came and came, giving the illusion of something never-ending.

He pointed. "They come from Victoria Station. They go through the City and the East End. It's a long ride."

"I've got three hours," she said . . .

The City was very quiet, even for Saturday afternoon. The bus rocked and rolled through narrow streets with their vaguely familiar names.

At last she was in the Mile End Road. Here was life and colour. The clouds had won against the sun, but fruit stalls cut the gloom, each orange a miniature sun in itself. There were apples and bananas, black and green grapes. Each fruit bloomed with a different lustre, appearing before her eyes, vanishing, and being replaced by a fresh showing.

MALACHI WHITAKER, *Five For Silver*

Bus Stop

What is this that roareth thus?
Can it be a Motor Bus?
Yes, the smell and hideous hum
Indicat Motorem Bum!

Whither shall thy victims flee?
Spare us, spare us, Motor Be!
Thus I sang; and still anigh
Came in hordes Motores Bi!

Domine, defende nos
Contra hos Motores Bos!

A. D. GODLEY

Caught Tripping

"If the passengers seem nervous," I told Fay, "mind you reassure them. Just tell them I've never driven a bus before . . ."

"Driving all right?" I asked after an hour or two.

"Oh, yes, Roly; very nice indeed," said Fay. She was still smiling. We did a couple more trips.

"Not throwing you about, am I?" I asked.

"Oh, no, Roly, very smooth," said Fay.

We did another three trips. Rather hurried ones. Then I had time to satisfy my curiosity about a funny noise.

"By the way, Fay," I asked, "what's that funny bumping noise every time we come to a stop?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that, Roly; it's only the passengers falling over when you put your brakes on."

C. R. WASON, *Busman's View*

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Punch Drunk

The conductor when he receives a fare
Will punch in the presence of the passinjare,
A blue trip-slip for an 8-cent fare,
A buff trip-slip for a 6-cent fare,
A pink trip-slip for a 3-cent fare,
All in the presence of the passinjare.
Punch, brother, punch, punch with care,
Punch in the presence of the passinjare.

ISAAC H. BROMLEY

Back Seat

With our furs, robe and quilt, the back seat all to ourselves, and pressed in each other's arms, we thought the weather had wonderfully moderated; we felt no cold, in fact we were all in a glow, and if our lips did meet in blissful kisses, it could not be wondered at. We at last fell asleep and did not awake until the Stage drew up at the door of the United States Hotel in Wheeling at 3 o'clock in the morning.

SAMUEL E. CHAMBERLAIN, *Recollections of a Rogue*

At Basildon the Beehive,
At Sevenoaks the Vine,
The Wheatsheaf at Far Forest,
And the Lion at Leintwardine—
We will not go to Far Cathay
Nor yet to Samarkand
But we will go forth journeying
By bus across the land;
And leave our bus and let it go,
When thirst has left us vexed,
And drink in comfort at the pub,
And wait there for the next.

ROSIE LEE

According to the rules of the company who hired out the coaches, no beer was to be allowed inside, but before we had got as far as London Bridge, bottles began to appear mysteriously from all directions—one actually rolled off the luggage rack on to somebody's head. The casualty remained practically unconscious until the coach nearly ran over a dog going down the Mile End Road, when the shouting and excitement brought him round.

MARGARET REYNOLDS, *Prisoner in the Bar*

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ICE-CREAM SUIT

Vamenos twitched
to make his skeleton comfortable

BY RAY BRADBURY

IT was summer twilight in the city, and out in front of the quiet-clicking billiard-hall three young Mexican-American men breathed the warm air and looked around at the world. Sometimes they talked and sometimes they said nothing at all, but watched the cars glide by like black panthers on the hot asphalt or saw trolleys loom up like thunderstorms, scatter lightning, and rumble away into silence.

"Hey," sighed Martinez at last. He was the youngest, the most sweetly sad of the three. "It's a swell night, huh? Swell."

As he observed the world it moved very close and then drifted away and then came close again. People brushing by were suddenly across the street. Buildings five miles away suddenly leaned over him. But most of the time everything—people, cars, and buildings—stayed far out on the edge of the world and could not be touched. On this quiet, warm, summer evening, Martinez' face was cold.

"Nights like this you wish—lots of things."

"Wishing," said the second man, Villanazul, "is the useless pastime of the unemployed."

"Unemployed?" cried Vamenos, the unshaven. "Listen to him! We've no jobs, no money."

"So," said Martinez, "we've no friends."

"True." Villanazul gazed off towards the green plaza where palm trees swayed in the soft night wind.

"Do you know what I wish? I wish to go into that plaza and speak among the businessmen who gather there at night to talk big talk. But dressed as I am, poor as I am, who would listen? So, Martinez, we have each other. The friendship of the poor is real friendship. We—"

But now a handsome young Mexican with a fine, thin moustache strolled by. And on each of his careless arms hung a laughing woman.

"Madre mia!" Martinez slapped his brow. "How is it that that one can come by two girl friends?"

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" It's his nice, new, white suit." Vamenos chewed a black thumbnail. " He looks smart."

Martinez leaned out to watch the trio moving away, and then at the block across the street, where from a fourth-floor window far above, a beautiful girl looked out, her dark hair faintly stirred by the wind. She had been there for ever, which was to say, for six weeks. He had nodded, he had raised a hand, he had smiled, he had blinked rapidly; he had even bowed to her, on the street, in the hall when visiting friends, in the park. Even now, he put his hands up from his waist and moved his fingers. But all the lovely girl did was let the summer wind stir her dark hair. He did not exist. He was nothing.

" Madre mia! " He looked away down the street where the man with his two friends was rounding the corner. " Oh, if I just had one suit, one! I wouldn't need money if I looked right."

" I hesitate to suggest," said Villanazul, " that you see Gomez. But he's been talking some crazy talk for a month now, about clothes. I keep saying I'll be in on it to make him go away. That Gomez."

" Friend," said a quiet voice.

" Gomez! " Everyone turned to stare.

Smiling strangely, Gomez pulled forth an endless, thin, yellow ribbon which fluttered and swirled on the summer air.

" What you doing with that tape measure? " said Martinez.

Gomez beamed. " Measuring people's skeletons."

" Skeletons! "

" Hold on." Gomez squinted at Martinez. " Caramba! Where you been all my life? Let's try you."

Martinez saw his arm seized and taped, his leg measured, his chest encircled.

" Keep still! " cried Gomez. " Arm—perfect. Leg—chest—perfecto! Now, quick, the height. There. Yes! Five foot five. You're in. Shake! " Pumping Martinez' hand he stopped suddenly. " Wait. You got—ten bucks? "

" *I* have! " Vamenos waved some grimy bills. " Gomez, measure me! "

" All I got left in the world is nine dollars and ninety-two cents." Martinez searched his pockets. " That's enough for a new suit? Why? "

" Why? Because you got the right skeleton, that's why! "

" Senor Gomez, I hardly know you— "

" Know me? You're going to live with me! Come on! "

Gomez vanished into the billiard-room. Martinez, escorted by the polite Villanazul, pushed by an eager Vamenos, found himself inside.

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" Dominguez! " said Gomez.

Dominguez, at a wall telephone, winked at them. A woman's voice squeaked on the receiver.

" Manulo! " said Gomez.

Manulo, a wine bottle tilted bubbling to his mouth, turned.

Gomez pointed at Martinez. " Our fifth volunteer! "

Dominguez said, " I got a date, don't bother me—" and stopped. The receiver slipped from his fingers. His black telephone book full of fine names and numbers went quickly back into his pocket. " Gomez, you—"

" Yes, yes. Your money, now! Vamos! "

The woman's voice sizzled on the dangling phone. Dominguez glanced at it uneasily. Manulo considered the empty wine bottle in his hand and the off-licence sign across the street.

Then, very reluctantly, both men laid ten dollars each on the green-baize billiard-table.

Villanazul, amazed, did likewise; so did Gomez, nudging Martinez. Martinez counted out his wrinkled notes and change. Gomez flourished the money like a royal flush.

" Fifty bucks! The suit costs sixty. All we need is ten bucks."

" Wait," said Martinez. " Gomez, are we talking about one suit? Uno? "

" Uno." Gomez raised a finger. " One wonderful, white, ice-cream, summer suit. White, white as the August moon! "

" But who will own this one suit? "

" Men," said Gomez, " let's show him. Line up."

Villanazul, Manulo, Dominguez, and Gomez rushed to plant their backs against the billiard-room wall.

" Martinez, you, too, the other end; line up! Now, Vamenos, lay that billiard-cue across our heads."

" Sure, Gomez; sure."

The cue lay flat on all their heads, with no rise or fall, as Vamenos, grinning, slid it along.

" We're all the same height," said Martinez.

" The same! " Everyone laughed.

" Sure," Gomez said. " It took a month—four weeks, mind you—to find four guys the same size. But now, five of us, same shoulders, chests, waists, arms; and as for weight? Men! "

Manulo, Dominguez, Villanazul, Gomez and, at last, Martinez stepped on the scales which flipped ink-stamped cards at them as Vamenos, still smiling, wildly fed in coins.

Heart pounding, Martinez read the cards.

" Ten stone nine pounds ; ten-ten; ten-seven; ten-six; ten-eight. A miracle! "

" No," said Villanazul simply. " Gomez."

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They all smiled upon that genius, who now encircled them with his arms. "Are we not fine?" he wondered. "All the same size, all the same dream—the suit. So each of us will look elegant at least one night each week, eh?"

"I haven't looked elegant in years," said Martinez. "The girls run away."

"They will run no more, they will freeze," said Gomez, "when they see you in the cool, white, summer, ice-cream suit."

"Gomez," said Villanazul, "just let me ask one thing."

"Of course, compadre."

"When we get this nice, new, white, ice-cream, summer suit, some night you're not going to put it on and walk down to the bus in it and go live in El Paso for a year in it, are you?"

"Villanazul, how can you say that?"

"My eyes see and my tongue moves," said Villanazul. "How about the Everybody Wins! Punchboard Lotteries you ran, and nobody won? How about the United Chili Con Carne and Frijole Company you were going to organise, and all that ever happened was the rent ran out on a two-by-four office?"

"The errors of a child now grown," said Gomez. "Enough! In this hot weather, someone may buy the special suit made just for us that stands waiting in the window of SHUMWAY'S SUNSHINE SUITS. We have fifty dollars. We need one more skeleton!"

Martinez saw the men peer round the billiard-hall. He looked where they looked. He felt his eyes hurry past Vamenos, then come reluctantly back to examine his dirty shirt, his huge, nicotined fingers.

"Me!" Vamenos burst out at last. "My skeleton, measure it, it's great. Sure, my hands are big, and my arms, from digging ditches. But—"

Just then Martinez heard passing on the pavement outside, that same terrible man with his two girls, all laughing and yelling together. He saw anguish move like the shadow of a summer cloud on the faces of the other men in the billiard-room.

Slowly Vamenos stepped on the scales. Eyes closed, he breathed a prayer. "Madre mia, please."

The machinery whirred, the card fell out. Vamenos opened his eyes.

"Look. Ten stone nine pounds. Another miracle!"

The men stared at his right hand and the card; at his left hand and a soiled ten-dollar bill.

Gomez swayed. Sweating, he licked his lips. Then his hand shot out, seized the money.

"The clothing store. The suit. Vamos . . ."

Mr. Shumway, of SHUMWAY'S SUNSHINE SUITS, paused while

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adjusting a tie rack, aware of some subtle atmospheric change outside his establishment.

"Pedro," he whispered to his assistant. "Look."

One man, Gomez, strolled by, looking in. Two men, Manulo and Dominguez, hurried by, staring in. Three men, Villanazul, Martinez, and Vamenos, jostling shoulders, did the same.

"Pedro." Mr. Shumway swallowed. "Call the police!"

Suddenly, six men filled the doorway. Martinez, crushed among them, his stomach slightly upset, his face feeling feverish, smiled so wildly at Pedro that Pedro let go the telephone.

"Hey," breathed Martinez, eyes wide. "There's a great suit over there."

"No." Manulo touched a lapel. "This one."

"There is only one suit in all the world," said Gomez coldly. "Mr. Shumway, the ice-cream-white, size thirty-four, that was in your window just an hour ago. It's gone! You didn't—"

"Sell it?" Mr. Shumway exhaled. "No, no. It's still on the dummy. This way, gents. Now which of you . . .?"

"All for one, one for all!" Martinez heard himself say, and laughed wildly. "We'll all try it on."

"All?" Mr. Shumway stared.

That's it, thought Martinez, look at our smiles. Now, look at the skeletons behind our smiles! Measure here, there; up, down; yes, do you see?

Mr. Shumway saw. He nodded. He shrugged. "All!"

He jerked the curtain. "There! Buy it, and I'll throw in the dummy, free."

Martinez peered quietly into the booth, his motion drawing the others to peer too. The suit was there. And it was white.

Martinez took a great trembling breath and exhaled, whispering, "Ai! Ai, caramba!"

"It dazzles my eyes," murmured Gomez.

"Mr. Shumway," Martinez heard Pedro hissing. "Ain't it a dangerous precedent to sell it? I mean, what if everybody bought one suit for six people?"

"Pedro," said Mr. Shumway, "you ever hear one single fifty-nine-dollar suit make so many people happy before?"

"Angel's wings," murmured Martinez. "The wings of white angels."

Martinez felt Mr. Shumway peering over his shoulder into the booth. The pale glow filled his eyes. "You know something, Pedro?" he said in awe. "That's a suit!"

Gomez, shouting, whistling, ran up to the third-floor landing and turned to wave on the others, who staggered, laughed,

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stopped, and had to sit down on the steps below. "Tonight!" cried Gomez. "Tonight you move in with me, eh? Save rent as well as clothes, eh? Sure. Martinez, you got the suit?"

"Have I?" Martinez lifted the white gift-wrapped box high. "From us to us!"

"Vamenos, you got the dummy?"

"Here."

Vamenos, chewing an old cigar, scattering sparks, slipped. The dummy, falling, toppled, turned over twice, and banged down the stairs.

"Vamenos! Dumb! Clumsy!"

They seized the dummy from him. Stricken, Vamenos looked about as if he'd lost something.

Manulo snapped his fingers. "Hey, Vamenos, we've got to celebrate. Go borrow some wine."

Vamenos plunged downstairs in a whirl of sparks.

The others moved into the room with the suit, leaving Martinez in the hall to study Gomez' face. "Gomez, you look ill."

"I am," said Gomez. "For what have I done?" He nodded to the shadows in the room working about the dummy. "I pick Dominguez, a devil with the women. All right. I pick Manulo, who drinks, yes, but who sings as sweet as a girl, eh? O.K. Villanazul reads books. You, you wash behind your ears. But then what do I do? Can I wait? No. I had to buy that suit.

"So the last guy I pick is a clumsy slob who has the right to wear my suit—" He stopped, confused. "Who may wear *our* suit one night a week, fall down in it, or not come in out of the rain in it. Why, why, why did I do it?"

"Gomez," whispered Villanazul from the room, "the suit is ready. Come, see if it looks as good using your light bulb."

Gomez and Martinez entered. And there on the dummy in the centre of the room was the phosphorescent, the miraculously white-fired ghost with the incredible lapels, the precise stitching, the neat buttonholes. Standing with the white illumination of the suit upon his cheeks, Martinez suddenly felt he was in church.

White. White! It was white as the whitest vanilla ice-cream, as the bottled milk on tenement doorsteps at dawn. White as a winter cloud all alone in the moonlit sky late at night.

"White," murmured Villanazul. "White as the snow on that mountain near our town in Mexico which is called the Sleeping Woman."

"Say that again," said Gomez.

Villanazul, proud yet humble, was glad to repeat his tribute. "White as the snow on the mountain called—"

"I'm back."

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Shocked, the men whirled to see Vamenos in the door, wine bottles in each hand. "A party. Here! Now tell us, who wears the suit first tonight? Me?"

"It's too late," said Gomez.

"Late! It's only a quarter past nine."

"Late?" said everyone, bristling. "Late?"

Gomez edged away from these men who glared from him to the suit to the open window.

Outside and below it was, after all, thought Martinez, a fine Saturday night in a summer month, and through the calm, warm darkness the women drifted like flowers on a quiet stream. The men made a mournful sound.

"Gomez, a suggestion." Villanazul licked his pencil and drew a chart on a pad. "You wear the suit from nine-thirty to ten, Manulo till ten-thirty, Dominguez till eleven, myself till eleven-thirty, Martinez till midnight, and—"

"Why me last?" demanded Vamenos, scowling.

Martinez thought quickly and smiled. "After midnight is the best time, friend."

"Hey," said Vamenos, "that's right. I never thought of that."

Gomez sighed. "All right. Half an hour each. But from now on, remember, we each wear the suit just one night a week. Sundays we draw straws for who wears the suit the extra night."

"Me," laughed Vamenos. "I'm lucky."

Gomez held on to Martinez tightly.

"Gomez," urged Martinez, "you first. Dress."

Gomez could not tear his eyes from that disreputable Vamenos. At last, impulsively, he yanked his shirt off over his head.

Whisper, rustle—the clean shirt. "Ah!"

How clean the new clothes felt, thought Martinez, holding the coat ready. How clean they sounded; how clean they smelt!

Whisper—the trousers, the tie; rustle—the braces. Whisper. Now Martinez let loose the coat, which fell in place on flexing shoulders.

"Olé!"

Gomez turned like a matador in his wondrous suit-of-lights.

"Olé, Gomez; olé!"

Gomez bowed and went out through the door.

Martinez fixed his eyes on his watch. At ten sharp he heard someone wandering about in the hall as if he had forgotten where to go. Martinez pulled the door open and looked out. Gomez was there, heading for nowhere.

He looks ill, thought Martinez. No; stunned, shaken up, surprised, many things. "Gomez! This is the place!"

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Gomez turned round and found his way through the door.

"Oh, friends, friends," he said. "Friends, what an experience! This suit. This suit."

"Tell us, Gomez," said Martinez.

"I can't; how can I say it?" He gazed at the heavens, arms spread, palms up.

"Tell us, Gomez."

"I have no words, no words. You must see, yourself. Yes, you must see." And here he lapsed into silence, shaking his head until at last he remembered they all stood watching him. "Who's next? Manulo?"

Manulo, stripped, leapt forward. "Ready!"

All laughed, shouted, whistled.

Manulo, ready, went out of the door. He was gone twenty-nine minutes and thirty seconds. He came back holding on to door-knobs, touching the wall, feeling his own elbows, putting the flat of his hand to his face.

"Oh, let me tell you," he said. "Compadres, I went to the bar, eh, to have a drink? But no, I did not go in the bar, do you hear? I did not drink. For as I walked I began to laugh and sing. Why, why? I listened to myself and asked this. Because the suit made me feel better than wine ever did. The suit made me drunk, drunk! So I went to the Guadalajara Refriteria instead, and played the guitar and sang four songs, very high. The suit, ah, the suit!"

Dominguez, next to be dressed, moved out through the world, came back from the world . . .

"On the street," said Dominguez, seeing it all again, eyes wide, "on the street, I walked; a woman cried, 'Dominguez, is that you?' Another said, 'Dominguez? No, Quetzalcoatl, the Great White God come from the East,' do you hear?

"And suddenly I didn't want to go with six women or eight, no. One, I thought. One! And to this one, who knows what I would say? 'Be mine!' Or 'Marry me.' Caramba! This suit is dangerous. But I did not care. I live, I live! Gomez, did it happen this way with you?"

Gomez, still dazed by the events of the evening, shook his head. "No, no talk. It's too much. Later. Villanazul?"

Villanazul moved shyly forward.

Villanazul went shyly out.

Villanazul came shyly home.

"Picture it," he said, not looking at them, looking at the floor, talking to the floor. "The Green Plaza, a group of elderly businessmen gathered under the stars and they are talking, nodding, talking. Now one of them whispers. All turn to stare.

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They move aside, they make a channel through which a white-hot light burns its way as through ice. At the centre of the great light is this person. I take a deep breath. My stomach is jelly. My voice is very small, but it grows louder. And what do I say? I say, 'Friends. Do you know Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*? In that book we find *his* Philosophy of Suits.'"

And at last it was time for Martinez to let the suit float him out to haunt the darkness.

Four times he walked round the block. Four times he paused, looking up at the window where the light was lit; a shadow moved, the beautiful girl was there, not there, away and gone. The fifth time, there she was, driven out by the summer heat, taking the cooler air. She glanced down. She made a gesture.

At first he thought she was waving to him. He felt like a white explosion that had riveted her attention. But she was not waving. Her hand gestured, and the next moment a pair of framed glasses sat upon her nose. She gazed at him.

Ah, ah, he thought, so that's it. So! Even the blind may see this suit. He smiled up at her. He did not have to wave. And at last, she smiled back. She did not have to wave, either. Then, because he did not know what else to do, and he could not get rid of this smile that had fastened itself to his cheeks, he hurried, almost ran round the corner, feeling her staring after him.

When he looked back, she had taken off her glasses and gazed now with the look of the nearsighted at what, at most, must be a moving blob of light in the great darkness here. Then for good measure he went round the block again, through a city so suddenly beautiful he wanted to yell, then laugh, then yell again.

Returning, he drifted, oblivious, eyes half closed. And seeing him in the door the others saw not Martinez, but themselves, come home. In that moment, they sensed that something had happened to them all.

"You're late!" cried Vamenos, but stopped. The spell could not be broken.

"Somebody tell me," said Martinez. "Who am I?"

He moved in a slow circle through the room.

Yes, he thought, yes, it was the suit; yes, it had to do with the suit and them all together in that store on this fine Saturday night, and then here, laughing and feeling more drunk without drinking, as Manulo said himself, as the night ran and each slipped on the trousers and held, toppling, to the others and, balanced, let the feeling get bigger and warmer and finer as each man departed and the next took his place in the suit, until now here stood Martinez all splendid and white as one who gives orders and the world grows quiet and moves aside.

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" Martinez, we borrowed three mirrors while you were gone. Look! "

The mirrors, set up as in the shop, angled to reflect three Martinezes and the echoes and memories of those who had occupied this suit with him and known the bright world inside this thread and cloth.

Now, in the shimmering mirror, Martinez saw the enormity of this thing they were living together, and his eyes grew wet. The others blinked. Martinez touched the mirrors. They shifted. He saw a thousand, a million white-armoured Martinezes march off into eternity, reflected, re-reflected for ever, indomitable, and unending.

He held the white coat out on the air. In a trance, the others did not at first recognise the dirty hand that reached to take it.

" Vamenos! "

" Pig! "

" You didn't wash," cried Gomez, " or even shave, while you waited! Compadres, the bath! "

" The bath! " said everyone.

" No," Vamenos flailed. " The night air. I'm dead! "

They hustled him, yelling, out and down the hall.

Now here stood Vamenos, unbelievable in white suit, beard shaved, hair combed, nails scrubbed.

His friends scowled darkly at him. For was it not true, thought Martinez, that when Vamenos passed by, avalanches itched on mountain tops? If he walked under windows, people spat, dumped rubbish. Tonight now, this night, he would stroll beneath ten thousand wide-opened windows, near balconies, past alleys. Suddenly the world absolutely sizzled with flies. And here was Vamenos, a fresh-frosted cake.

" You sure look smart in that suit, Vamenos," said Manulo sadly.

" Thanks." Vamenos twitched, trying to make his skeleton comfortable where all their skeletons had so recently been.

In a small voice, Vamenos asked, " Can I go now? "

" Villanazul," said Gomez. " Copy down these rules."

Villanazul licked his pencil.

" First," said Gomez, " don't fall down in that suit, Vamenos."

" I won't."

" Don't lean against buildings in that suit."

" No buildings."

" Don't walk under trees with birds in them, in that suit. Don't smoke. Don't drink—"

" Please," said Vamenos, " can I sit down in this suit? "

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"When in doubt, take the trousers off, fold them over a chair."

"Wish me luck," said Vamenos.

"Go with God, Vamenos."

He went out. He shut the door. There was a ripping sound.

"Vamenos!" cried Martinez. He whipped the door open.

Vamenos stood with two halves of a handkerchief torn in his hands, laughing. "R-r-rip! Look at your faces. R-r-rip!" He tore the cloth again. "Oh, your faces, your faces. Ha!"

Roaring, Vamenos slammed the door, leaving them stunned and alone.

Gomez put both hands on top of his head and turned away. "Stone me. Kill me. I have sold our souls to a demon."

Villanazul dug in his pockets, took out a silver coin, and studied it for a long while.

"Here is my last fifty cents. Who else will help me buy back Vamenos' share of the suit?"

"It's no use." Manulo showed them ten cents. "We've got only enough to buy the lapels and the buttonholes."

Gomez, at the open window, suddenly leaned out and yelled, "Vamenos! No!"

Below in the street, Vamenos, shocked, blew out a match, and threw away an old cigar butt he had found somewhere. He made a strange gesture to all the men in the window above, then waved airily and sauntered on.

Somehow, the five men could not move away from the window. They were crushed together there.

"I bet he eats a hamburger in that suit," mused Villanazul. "I'm thinking of the mustard."

"Don't!" cried Gomez. "No, no."

Manulo was suddenly at the door. "I need a drink, badly."

"Manulo, there's wine here, that bottle on the floor."

Manulo went out and shut the door.

A moment later, Villanazul stretched with great exaggeration and strolled about the room.

"I think I'll walk down to the plaza, friends."

He was not gone a minute when Dominguez turned the doorknob.

"Dominguez," said Gomez.

"Yes?"

"If you see Vamenos, by accident," said Gomez, "warn him away from Mickey Murillo's Red Rooster Café. They got fights not only *on* TV but in front of the TV, too."

"He wouldn't go into Murillo's," said Dominguez. "That suit means too much to Vamenos. He wouldn't hurt it."

"He'd shoot his mother first," said Martinez.

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" Sure he would."

Martinez and Gomez, alone, listened to Dominguez' footsteps hurry away down the stairs. They circled the tailor's undressed dummy.

For a long while, biting his lips, Gomez stood at the window, looking out. He touched his shirt pocket twice, took his hand away, and then at last pulled something from the pocket. Without looking at it, he handed it to Martinez. " Martinez, take this."

" What is it? "

Martinez looked at the piece of folded pink paper with print on it, with names and numbers. His eyes widened.

" A ticket on the bus to El Paso, three weeks from now."

Gomez nodded. He couldn't look at Martinez. He stared out into the summer night. " Turn it in. Get the money," he said. " Buy us a nice, white, panama hat and a pale blue tie to go with the white ice-cream suit, Martinez. Do that."

Mickey Murillo's Red Rooster Café and Cocktail Lounge was squashed between two big brick buildings and, being narrow, had to be deep. Outside, serpents of red and sulphur-green neon fizzed and snapped. Inside, dim shapes loomed and swam away to lose themselves in a swarming night sea.

Martinez, on tiptoe, peeked through a flaked place on the red-painted front window. He felt a presence on his left, heard breathing on his right. He glanced in both directions.

" Manulo. Villanazul."

" I decided I wasn't thirsty," said Manulo. " So I took a walk."

" I was just on my way to the plaza," said Villanazul, " and decided to go the long way round."

As if by agreement the three men shut up now and turned together to peer on tiptoe through various flaked spots on the window.

A moment later, all three felt a new, very warm presence behind them and heard still faster breathing.

" Is our white suit in there? " asked Gomez' voice.

" Gomez," said everybody, surprised.

" Yes," cried Dominguez, having just arrived to find his own peephole. " There's the suit. And Vamenos is still in it."

" I can't see." Gomez squinted, shielding his eyes. " What's he doing? "

Martinez peered. Yes! There, way back in the shadows, was a big chunk of snow, and the idiot smile of Vamenos winking above it, wreathed in smoke.

" He's smoking," said Martinez.

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"He's drinking," said Dominguez.

"He's eating a plum," reported Villanazul.

"A juicy plum," added Manulo.

"No," said Gomez. "No, no, no."

"Ruby Escuadrillo's with him!"

"Let me see that." Gomez pushed Martinez aside.

Yes, there was Ruby. Fourteen and a half stone of glittering sequins and tight black satin on the hoof, her scarlet fingernails clutching Vamenos' shoulder. Her cowlike face, floured with powder, greasy with lipstick, hanging over him.

"That hippo!" said Dominguez. "She's crushing the shoulder pads. Look, she's going to sit on his lap."

"No, no! Not with all that powder and lipstick," said Gomez. "Manulo, inside! Grab that drink. Villanazul, the cigar, the plum. Dominguez, date Ruby Escuadrillo, get her away."

The three vanished, leaving Gomez and Martinez to stare, gasping, through the peekhole.

"Manulo, he's got the drink; he's drinking it."

"Olé! There's Villanazul, he's got the cigar; he's eating the plum."

"Hey, Dominguez, he's got Ruby. What a brave one!"

A shadow bulked through Murillo's doorway, travelling fast.

"Gomez!" Martinez clutched Gomez' arm. "That was Ruby Escuadrillo's boy friend, Toro Ruiz. If he finds her with Vamenos, the ice-cream suit will be covered with blood."

"Don't make me nervous," said Gomez. "Quick!"

Both ran. They reached Vamenos just as Toro Ruiz grabbed about two feet of the lapels of that wonderful ice-cream suit.

"Let go Vamenos!" said Martinez.

"Let go that suit!" corrected Gomez.

Toro Ruiz, tap-dancing Vamenos, leered at these intruders.

Villanazul stepped up shyly. Villanazul smiled. "Don't hit him. Hit me." Toro Ruiz hit Villanazul on the nose.

Villanazul, holding his nose, tears stinging his eyes, wandered off.

Gomez grabbed one of Toro Ruiz' arms, Martinez the other.

"Drop him, let go, coyote, vaca!"

Toro Ruiz twisted the ice-cream suit material until all six men screamed in mortal agony. Grunting, sweating, Toro Ruiz dislodged as many as climbed on. He was winding up to hit Vamenos when Villanazul wandered back, eyes streaming.

"Don't hit him. Hit me!"

As Toro Ruiz hit Villanazul on the nose, a chair crashed on Toro's head. A moment later Toro was in ruins at their feet.

"Compadres, this way!"

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They ran Vamenos outside and set him down, where he freed himself of their hands with injured dignity. "My time ain't up. I still got two minutes and—ten seconds."

"What?" said everybody.

"Vamenos," said Gomez, "you let a Guadalajara cow climb on you, you pick fights, you smoke, you drink, you eat plums, and now you have the nerve to say your time ain't up?"

"I got two minutes and one second left."

"Hey, Vamenos, you sure look smart!" Distantly, a woman's voice called from across the street.

Vamenos smiled and buttoned the coat. "It's Ramona Alvarez. Ramona, wait." Vamenos stepped off the kerb.

"Vamenos," pleaded Gomez, "what can you do in one minute and—" he checked his watch—"forty seconds?"

"Watch. Hey, Ramona!" Vamenos loped off.

"Vamenos, look out!"

Vamenos, surprised, whirled, saw a car, heard the shriek of brakes.

"No," said all five men on the pavement.

Martinez heard the impact and flinched. His head moved up. Vamenos looked like white laundry, he thought, flying through the air. His head came down.

"I don't want to live," said Gomez quietly. "Kill me, someone."

Then, shuffling, Martinez looked down and told his feet to walk, stagger, follow one after the other. He collided with other men. Now they were trying to run. They ran at last and somehow crossed a street, like a deep river through which they could only wade, to look down at Vamenos.

"Vamenos," said Martinez. "You're alive."

Strewn on his back, mouth open, eyes squeezed tight, tight, Vamenos moved his head back and forth, back and forth, moaning.

"Tell me, tell me; oh, tell me, tell me."

"Tell you what, Vamenos?"

Vamenos clenched his fists, ground his teeth. "The suit, what have I done to the suit, the suit, the suit?"

The men crouched lower. "Vamenos, it's— Why, it's O.K.!"

"You lie," said Vamenos. "It's torn, it must be, it must be, it's torn, all round, underneath?"

"No." Martinez knelt and touched here and there. "Vamenos, all round, underneath even, it's O.K."

Vamenos opened his eyes to let the tears run free at last. "A miracle," he sobbed, "praise the saints." He quieted. "The car?"

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"Hit and run." Gomez suddenly remembered and glared at the empty street. "It's good he didn't stop. We'd have—"

Everyone listened. Distantly, a siren wailed.

"Someone phoned for an ambulance."

"Quick!" said Vamenos, eyes rolling. "Pick me up. Take off our coat."

"Vamenos—"

"Shut up, idiots!" cried Vamenos. "The coat, that's it. Now, the trousers; the trousers, quick, quick! Those doctors! You've seen films? They rip the trousers with razors to get them off. They don't care. They're maniacs. Quick!"

The siren screamed. The men, panicking, all handled Vamenos at once. "Right leg, easy; hurry! Good. Left leg, now; left, you hear? There, easy, easy. Quick! Martinez, your trousers, take them off."

"What?" Martinez froze. The siren shrieked.

"Fool!" wailed Vamenos. "All is lost. Your trousers. Give me." Martinez jerked at his belt buckle.

"Close in, make a circle."

Dark trousers, light trousers, flourished on the air.

"Quick, here come the maniacs with the razors. Right leg on, left leg, there."

"The zipper, cows, zip my zipper!" babbled Vamenos.

The siren died.

"Madre mia, yes, just in time! They arrive." Vamenos lay back and shut his eyes. "Gracias."

Martinez turned, nonchalantly buckling on the white trousers as the ambulance attendants brushed past.

"Broken leg," said one as they moved Vamenos on to a stretcher.

"Compadres," said Vamenos, "don't be angry with me."

Gomez snorted. "Who's angry?"

In the ambulance, head tilted back, looking out at them upside down, Vamenos faltered. "Compadres, when I come from hospital, am I still in the bunch? You won't kick me out? I'll give up smoking, keep away from Murillo's, swear off women—"

"Vamenos," said Martinez gently, "don't promise nothing."

Vamenos, upside down, eyes brimming wet, saw Martinez there, all white now against the stars.

"Oh, Martinez, you sure look great in that suit. Compadres, don't he look beautiful?"

Villanazul climbed in beside Vamenos. The door slammed. The four remaining men watched the ambulance drive away. Then, surrounded by his friends, inside the white suit, Martinez was carefully escorted back to the kerb.

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In their room, Martinez got out the cleaning fluid and the others stood round, telling him how to clean the suit, how not to have the iron too hot, how to work the lapels and the crease. When the suit was cleaned and pressed so that it looked like a fresh gardenia just opened, they fitted it to the dummy.

"Two o'clock," murmured Villanazul. "I hope Vamenos sleeps well. When I left him, he looked fine."

Manulo cleared his throat. "Nobody else is going out with that suit tonight, huh?" The others glared at him.

Manulo flushed. "I mean—it's late. We're tired. Maybe no one will use the suit for forty-eight hours, huh? Give it a rest. Sure. Well, where do we sleep?"

The night being still hot and the room unbearable, they carried the suit on its dummy out and down the hall. They brought with them also some pillows and blankets. They climbed the stairs towards the roof of the block. There, thought Martinez, was the cooler wind, and sleep.

On the way, they passed a dozen doors that stood open, people still sweating and awake, playing cards, drinking pop, fanning themselves with magazines.

I wonder, thought Martinez. I wonder if—yes!

On the fourth floor, a certain door stood open. The beautiful girl looked up as the five men passed. She wore glasses, and when she saw Martinez she snatched them off and hid them under her book.

The others went on, not knowing they had lost Martinez, who seemed stuck fast in the open door.

For a long moment he could say nothing. Then he said, "José Martinez."

And she said, "Celia Obregon."

And then both said nothing.

He heard the men moving up on the roof; he moved to follow.

She said quickly, "I saw you tonight."

He came back. "The suit," he said.

"The suit," she said, and paused. "But not the suit."

"Eh?" he said.

She lifted the book to show the glasses lying in her lap. She touched the glasses. "I do not see well. You would think I would wear my glasses, but no. I walk around for years now, hiding them, seeing nothing. But tonight, even without the glasses, I see. A great whiteness passes below in the dark. So white! And I put on my glasses quickly."

"The suit, as I said," said Martinez.

"The suit for a little moment, yes; but there is another whiteness above the suit."

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" Another? "

" Your teeth. Oh, such white teeth, and so many."

Martinez put his hand over his mouth.

" So happy, Mr. Martinez," she said. " I have not often seen such a happy face and such a smile."

" Ah," he said, not able to look at her, his face flushing now.

" So, you see," she said quietly, " the suit caught my eye, yes, the whiteness filled the night, below. But the teeth were much whiter. Now, I have forgotten the suit."

Martinez flushed again. She, too, was overcome with what she had said. She looked at her hands and at the door above his head.

" May I—" he said, at last.

" May you—? "

" May I call for you," he asked, " when next the suit is mine to wear? "

" You do not need the suit," she said.

" But—"

" If it were just the suit," she said, " anyone would be fine in it. But no, I watched. I saw many men in that suit, all different, this night. So again I say, you do not need to wait for the suit."

" Madre mia, madre mia! " he cried happily. And then, more quietly, " I will need the suit for a little while. A month, six months, a year. I am uncertain. I am fearful of many things. I am young. The suit changes me, makes me strong."

" That is as it should be," she said.

" Good night, Miss—"

" Celia Obregon."

" Celia Obregon," he said, and was gone from the door.

The others were waiting on the roof. A cooler night wind was blowing here, up in the sky.

Martinez stood alone by the white suit, smoothing the lapels, talking half to himself. " Ai, caramba, what a night! Seems ten years since seven o'clock, when it all started and I had no friends. Two in the morning. I got all kinds of friends."

He paused and thought, Celia Obregon, Celia Obregon. " All kinds of friends," he went on. " I got a room, I got clothes. You tell me. You know what? "

He looked round at the men lying on the rooftop, surrounding the dummy and himself.

" It's funny. When I wear this suit, I know I will win at billiards like Gomez. A woman will look at me like Dominguez. I will be able to sing like Manulo, sweetly. I will talk fine politics like Villanazul. I'm strong as Vamenos. So? So, tonight, I'm more than Martinez. I am Gomez, Manulo, Dominguez, Villanazul, Vamenos. I am everyone."

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He stood a moment longer by this suit which could retain all the ways they sat or stood or walked. This suit which could move fast and nervous like Gomez, or slow and thoughtfully like Villanazul, or drift like Dominguez who never touched ground, who always found a wind to take him somewhere. This suit which belonged to them, but which also owned them all. This suit that was—what? A parade.

"Martinez," said Gomez. "You going to sleep?"

"Sure. I'm just thinking."

"What?"

"If we ever get rich," said Martinez softly, "it'll be kind of sad. Then we'll all have suits. And there won't be no more nights like tonight. It'll break up the old gang. It'll never be the same, after that."

The men lay thinking of what had just been said.

Gomez nodded gently. "Yes. It'll never be the same, after that."

Martinez lay down on his blanket. In darkness, with the others, he faced the middle of the roof and the dummy, which was the centre of their lives. And their eyes were bright, shining, and good to see in the dark as the neon lights from nearby buildings flicked on, flicked off, flicked on, flicked off, revealing and then hiding, revealing and then hiding, their wonderful white vanilla-ice-cream summer suit.

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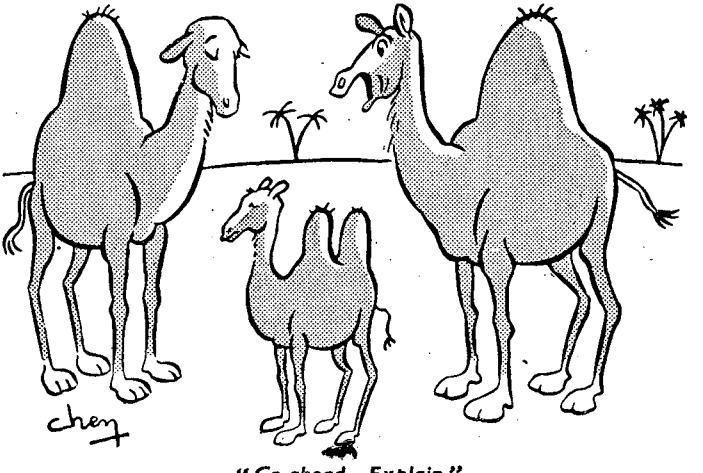

"Go ahead. Explain."

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PEMBERTON THRUSH

The voice in warm, melting cadences drove through the night-world of ice and snow

BY H. E. BATES

IT WAS not his father who first called her the Pemberton Thrush. That was a name invented by the music critic on a north of England newspaper in her native town. Afterwards she came southward. She was a small, dark-haired girl with soft, white skin and friendly, brimming eyes.

He was not quite seven when he first heard her sing. They were the days when his father had organised a quartette for mixed voices, and when the little front parlour of the house, with its fretted walnut piano and three Dresden vases on the slate mantelpiece and pots of asparagus fern on the bay window-sills, was so often full of the sound of singing. In those days his father was passionately fond of unaccompanied part songs.

One of three Dresden vases, the largest one, the one that always stood in the centre, had a dancing scene, mostly in rose and green, painted on the front of it. Several girls, all rather plump and with flowing skirts and hair, were depicted dancing in a garden between lacy trees and in front of terraces and statuary. He could not help thinking that the Pemberton Thrush, or Miss Mortenson as he first knew her and as she really was, looked so like the principal figure on that vase. She had the same fresh, soft-skinned, charming grace, the same way of holding the tips of the fingers of her hands just touching each other, as if neither of them could bear to part.

It was on a cold December evening that he first heard her sing. After he had put on his red felt slippers and his nightgown, he was sometimes allowed to come down for a few minutes to eat his basin of bread and milk, or his mutton broth with bread in it, in the kitchen. He liked the mutton broth best; the bread swam in it better; his ships didn't sink so soon. It also kept hot longer, so that he couldn't eat it so fast and had to stay up later, blowing it hard, and there were many wonderful little blobs of golden fat in it that reflected the gaslight like little moons.

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That night the broth was hotter than usual. The tip of the spoon kept burning his tongue no matter how much he blew and made storms so that his ships rocked against the shores of the basin. He played a lot with the ships, until at last his mother said he was dainty.

"Eat it up," she said. "I don't like little boys who are dainty."

He kept saying the broth was too hot, but what he was really doing most of the time was listening to the sound of singing from the front parlour and wishing that he was there, where the fire had been specially lighted and candles were burning on the curly brass arms of the piano.

"Can I go and say good night to Father while it gets cold?"

"All right. Quickly, though. Look sharp and come back. They don't want to be bothered with you in there."

Then he was in the front room. It was as he always liked to picture it: the fire burning with blue leaves of flame because it was so cold outside, the candles shining on the nutty, golden veneer of the piano, the pages of sheet music lying about the sofa and the chairs.

"I came to say good night."

"Very well, then. Say good night to everybody. And look slippy."

It was nice when his father said things like "look slippy;" then he knew that there was really no chance of his being sharp or angry.

First he said good night to Miss Flavell. She was the soprano. She had a rather long neck which was enclosed in a sort of lace stocking that was kept stiff with pieces of bone in the sides. She was quite tall and her hair had a touch of pale ginger. The same touch of ginger was responsible for the fact that sometimes he thought her eyes hadn't any lashes.

"Good night, Miss Flavell."

He was never really at ease with Miss Flavell, who bent rather stiffly. Then Mr. Welsh, the tenor, a very dapper man with moustaches screwed and waxed to excruciating comical points, actually shook hands with him and pretended he was a man and called him Mister B. He always did that. Everything about him smelt of violet brilliantine.

"Well, good night, Mister B. Sleep well and don't fall out of bed, Mister B."

That was because he had once had a nightmare and fallen out of bed with a loud bump while the quartette were still singing. Mr. Welsh had never forgotten it and thought it was very funny.

"Now you don't know this lady, do you?"

"No."

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"This is Miss Mortenson. She comes from a long way away."

"Where?"

"Up in the north. A long, long way away. She's come to live here."

Then she was stooping to say good night to him. Unlike Miss Flavell she did not merely bend. She actually stooped, almost on her knees, so that her face was level and close to him.

"Not shy, are you?"

"No."

Her eyes were wonderfully warm and dark. Her skin was very soft when she touched his hands. He felt he could never be shy with such friendly, brimming eyes, so warm under their masses of dark brown hair.

"How old are you?"

"Six and in my seven."

"Seven? That's lucky, isn't it? That's a lucky number."

She had a little blue enamel watch pinned on the left-hand side of her white silk blouse, and when she suddenly leaned forward it swung from her bosom like a pendulum.

"Kiss?"

She kissed him suddenly on the mouth. Her lips were most beautifully soft and full, not at all like the lips of Miss Flavell or his aunts, some of whom had hairs on their chins.

"That was nice," she said. "I liked that." Everybody started laughing because now he darted forward and gave her a second kiss. "Thank you. I liked that even better. When do you think I shall see you again?"

"Thursday."

"Oh! Oh!" his father said. "Here, here! Off to bed now—up Wooden Hill."

"That's it," she said. "And down Sheet Lane. And play a game of Shut-Eyes."

"Good night," he said.

"Good night," she said. "See you Thursday."

Then, as he ran quickly out of the room, he heard her say in her northern accent, laughing at the same time, "Well, that didn't take long. That was a conquest if you like. I've soon got myself a beau."

He didn't know what either a conquest or a beau was, but as he lay upstairs, trying to get warm in the cold, clean bed, he heard her singing for the first time. It was a round, liquid voice and he did not wonder at all that next morning his father spoke of her as a bird.

"You know, there wasn't a tremor there. Never the ghost of a tremor there. That was singing if you like. There's nobody

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in this town can sing like that. It made Maggie Flavell look a bit old at her once or twice, I tell you. I don't wonder they call her the Pemberton Thrush."

"I don't think she looks much like a thrush," he said.

"Well, you should know!" his father said. "You were the one who got closest to her."

"She's nice," he said. "I like her."

"That girl knows *how* to sing," his father said. "And I tell you something else—her words. You can hear every jack one of them. I tell you, that's before your time."

Whenever his father said something was before your time you knew that it was very wonderful.

After that, all through the winter, she was at the house twice a week, sometimes three times, for practices. He looked forward to the time when he could go in to say good night to her, kiss her, and take part in a little game they played together.

It was a game about her watch. It started because he wanted to know, one evening, how you opened it. "Inquisitive, inquisitive!" his father said.

But she said, "Let the boy be inquisitive. That's all right. That's how he'll find out things."

You opened the watch by a tiny, secret spring. It took him several weeks to find it. As time went on, he knew that his father was rather annoyed about it all, but it was always she who said, "Well, now. Are you going to try to find how the watch opens? It's easy, really. It's like everything else—easy when you know how."

"You open it for me."

"Oh, no," she said, "that's cheating. You open it and find out what's inside."

"What is inside?"

"Ah," she said. "That's it."

Then after he had said good night he would lie upstairs in bed and listen to the sound of her singing. He could pick out her voice, warmer, deeper, and more flowing than all the rest.

Once there was deep snow on the ground and bitter frost that made the ice on the pavements crunch as hard and crisp as the sugar you got out of candied peel. He did not know whether it was the purer, sharper air of the snow-world that made her voice seem more melting that night but she sang, he thought, with exceptional depth and beauty. It was like someone singing with all her heart and her flesh. The voice seemed to drive with its melting cadences far through the still night-world of ice and snow.

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He was still not asleep when they finished singing. The footsteps of the three singers who were going home crunched hard on the icy pavement outside. Then he got suddenly out of bed and pulled back a corner of the blind and looked down at the street below.

Miss Flavell was already crossing the street and going away alone. Frost was like stiff icing-sugar on all the roofs of the street, shining in the light of the street lamp and the stars. Miss Flavell's high lace-up boots kicked powder snow as they ran.

He heard Miss Mortenson laughing. Mr. Welsh whispered something and laughed, too. He thought she laughed rather in the way that she sang: warm in her throat, with all her heart and her flesh, freely and very pleasantly and as if she loved laughing.

Then Mr. Welsh was pressing her against the railings of the garden fence below. Her hat was knocked back on her head. Trying to save it, she brought both hands up above her head and gently put the hat in its place again. Then for a moment or two the tips of her fingers stayed together, not locking but simply touching lightly, and then gradually fell apart. It was during this time that Mr. Welsh was kissing her.

Some days afterwards the snow melted; it was not long before spring came. The evenings became lighter and he thought it was not so nice to go into the front parlour and see no fire there and no candles burning on the piano.

Then a strange thing happened. One spring evening he went into the front parlour to say good night and she was not there.

"Isn't Miss Mortenson here?" he said. "Where is Miss Mortenson?"

"Inquisitive, inquisitive," his father said. "Never mind about that."

As he went out of the room, disappointed because he thought he had, at long last, discovered the secret of the watch, he heard his father say, "Well, shall we start running through? She's bound to be here soon."

"Well, we can only hope so," Miss Flavell said.

Several evenings later he was alone for a time in the house when the doorbell rang. When he went to answer it, Miss Mortenson was there.

"Is your father in?"

"No. He's gone to chapel with Mother, to practise for Easter."

"Perhaps I could come in and wait?" she said.

"Yes," he said.

He was glad about that. He took her into the front parlour.

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She was wearing a pretty, flouncy, white blouse with big puff-sleeves, and a blue skirt with a black patent leather belt, and on her blouse the watch was pinned.

"I think I know how to open your watch now."

"You do? How?"

"Like this."

He turned the watch in his hands. On the back of it was a periwinkle flower, in blue, with trailing stems. She had said to him once, "Perhaps if you tried to pick the flower—" and then he had thought it out. At the very tip of one of the trailing stems was a little spring.

You touched it and the watch came open.

"There! You got it at last," she said. "All this time."

"And what's inside it?"

"Ah," she said.

He opened the watch more fully and sat looking inside.

"A lady," he said. "You."

"You think it looks like me?"

"Yes," he said. "Only your hair's much nicer now."

He supposed it was for that that she kissed him. She laughed and said something about his knowing how to treat the ladies and say the right things to them. Her lips were as warm and shapely as ever, and there was a wonderful scent of lily-of-the-valley at the neck of her blouse.

"Well, I must run along now," she said. "Give this to your father, would you?"

It was an envelope and he said he would give it to his father.

"I know you won't forget," she said.

He promised he wouldn't forget.

"I'm glad I found out about the watch," he said. "Can I open it again on Thursday?"

"I shan't be coming on Thursday," she said. "I don't think I shall be coming any more."

The trouble was, his father said, that she was too free. She was too friendly. He said this over and over again during the next week or two. He said several more things and seemed agitated and affronted and even pained as he said them.

"She sang at the Band Club on Sunday," he said. "*At the Band Club.* Think of that. A girl like her. A voice like that. R.J. told me."

Whenever his father said he had been told things by R.J. or F.W. he knew that it meant that little pigs had big ears and he was not supposed to be listening. It was always some terribly serious thing; very secret and not very nice, if he said he had heard it from R.J.

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"Too free," his father said. "Spoilt herself. With that voice, with a voice like that—" behind it all lay some ghastly, inexcusable disappointment—"I don't know which is the worst, club or pub. Singing on Sundays. Cheap concerts. Cheap, low-down concerts."

His father began by being upset, and then was distressed and angry. "And you know who's at the bottom of it, don't you? Jerry Latham."

"Never was any good," his mother said.

"She met him up north somewhere. At some competition where they were both singing. I say singing—he never could sing. That's why she came down here. He talked her into it. And I suppose she was fool enough to listen."

"Always something oily about him," his mother said. "Never anything but a masher."

"When I think of a voice like that," was all his father could say. "Wasted—completely wasted—thrown away."

How, the boy thought, could anyone be too free and too friendly? A nice, warm person like that. What did that mean?

"Too fond of attention," his father said once. "Too easily led. Too ready to give and too ready to take—and she doesn't mind who from. You know what P.S. told me yesterday?"

"I wish Miss Mortenson would come again," he said.

"You speak when you're spoken to," his father said. "Never mind about Miss Mortenson."

He did not, in fact, see her again for thirty years. Then after a visit to his father he was travelling down to the main-line junction one winter afternoon, through fields of snow, across the valley where his father and Miss Flavell and Mr. Welsh and the Pemberton Thrush had so often gone out to soirées and socials and concerts and competitions to sing songs like *On the Banks of Allan Water* and *Drink to me only with thine eyes* and *Have you seen but a white lyly grow?*

He did not recognise her at first. She sat in the corner of the railway carriage, bunched up in a brown fur coat. Even when she said, in her easy northern accent, "Enough to freeze you, isn't it? They never have any heat on this branch-line. And if there's anything I do hate it's snow," he was still not quite sure of her.

Then he saw her bring the tips of her fingers together, either in a gesture of impatience or annoyance at the cold, the wretched branch-line, or the snow, and he saw at the same time the watch on her wrist. It was the same watch he had so often tried to open as a boy. She had had it made into a wristwatch with an expanding bracelet of silver.

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" I don't suppose you would remember me," he said.

" No," she said. " I don't know that I do."

He told her his name.

" Oh lord! " she said.

Her hair was still dark, but the smooth skin of her face, once taut and full, had now a deflated sort of look and was yellow.

" Don't tell me that," she said. " That takes me back too far."

Her laugh was rather cracked.

" Do you still sing? " he said.

" Me? Oh lord, no! " she said. " I gave that up in the First World War."

" You had a fine voice," he said. " My father thought the world of it."

" Oh, don't talk about it," she said. " It takes me back too far."

His memories of her were so vivid that each time she made a gesture, either with her head or her hands, he felt that he was back again in the front parlour of his father's house, in the cold, blue-flamed winters of his childhood, entranced by the candles on the piano, by her voice, and by the periwinkle watch he could not open.

He was tempted several times to ask her about the watch. He was tempted also to ask her why, with a voice like that, she had given up her singing. But he felt that perhaps the first question was rather silly, and he did not know how to frame the second. All he said was, " My father still sings a bit. It keeps him going."

" I know," she said, " but then your father's not a fool."

Almost unintentionally, without knowing it, she tugged at the lapels of her fur coat in a gesture of impatience. Behind the impatience there was a look of remote sadness in her eyes that, he thought, was not of her making. She coughed. The fur coat did not suit her. It was not quite that he expected moths to fly out of it, but simply that it made her look like an old, brown-haired, shapeless, moulting dog.

" Some people are too daft to know they're alive," she said.

He felt he would like to have told her that she was pretty, too; but it was not easy, in a railway carriage, before almost a strange person, to re-frame and re-state an impression of childhood so that it carried the right air of truth. Perhaps, he thought, she had not been quite so pretty as that? Perhaps she had not really been able to sing so beautifully after all?

" I could have gone with the Carl Rosa," she said. " But then, I tell you—some people are too daft to know they were born."

" Well," he said, " I can tell you this. You gave one person a great deal of pleasure."

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"That's something at any rate."

Abruptly, with her newspaper, she rubbed at the half-frozen vapour of the carriage window and stared out at the snow.

"If you ask me, there's more of this stuff to come," she said. "The papers say there's snow all over Europe. You bet we'll get it if they do."

She shuddered and pulled the fur coat about her.

"You know what I'd like to do with myself when the snow comes?" she said. "Bury myself."

It was perhaps ridiculous, but when she said that he was aware of tears inside himself.

She pulled back the floppy sleeve of her coat and looked at her watch. There was evidently something wrong with it, and she shook it several times and put it to her ear.

"This damn train's running late again," she said, "or else it's my watch. It's like me—getting past it. What do you make the time?"

"The time?" he said. He looked at his own watch. "I make it exactly three minutes past."

"We ought to have been in ten minutes ago," she said. "Now I'll miss my connection."

"Don't worry. They always wait," he said.

"That's all you know."

She hugged on to her lap a large, black string bag stuffed with all sorts of oddments. "What a day to be out," she said, "what a day to be alive."

The last he saw of her was when she made a scrambling sort of run down the station platform, over frozen snow, panting to catch the main-line train. Her body was too short for a fur coat of that kind, and again he thought she looked like a shapeless, moulting dog.

Even before she got into the carriage snow began to fall again. He actually saw a few big, fat flakes settle on her moulting fur. Soon all the air was dancing. And as he watched it he remembered her hands holding her hat in the snow, the nights when she had stooped to kiss him, the periwinkle watch whose spring he could not find, and her voice singing with such warm, dark beauty in the winter night-times.

Bury yourself, he thought. Someone will weep for you.

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WELL OILED?

A young man in his salad days is very particular about his dressing.

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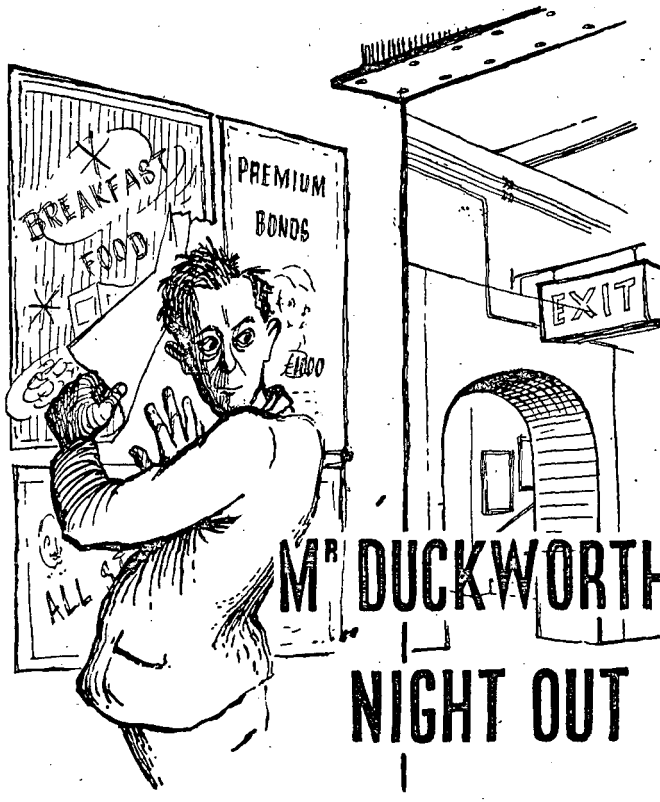

MR DUCKWORTH'S NIGHT OUT

A PATRICK PETRELLA STORY

THE curious and involved transaction which is recorded in the annals of Gabriel Street under the title of Herring Jam may be traced to its beginning in the Court of Mr. Whitcomb, the South Borough Stipendiary Magistrate.

Detective Inspector Patrick Petrella, who was there on duty, was reminded of a remark once made to him by Sergeant Drage of the British Railways police, that the travelling public was divisible into three classes: people who travelled without tickets, people who stole goods in transit, and people who defaced posters.

In the dock when he arrived, he found an apple-cheeked old lady, accused of travelling from Wimbledon to Charing Cross with a threepenny ticket. Her defence, which she was conducting

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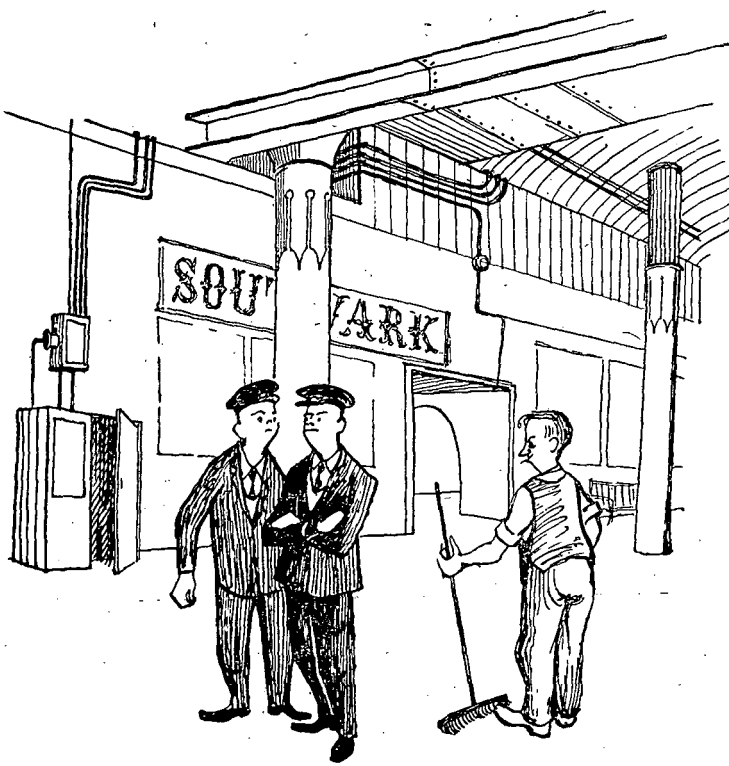

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

herself, was that she had asked for a ticket to the Kennington Oval, but the booking clerk had misheard her.

" But surely, madam," said Mr. Whitcomb, with the courtesy for which he was renowned, " it costs more than threepence to travel from Wimbledon to the Oval."

Certainly, agreed the old lady, but since the booking clerk was clearly stone deaf, what was more likely than that when *she* had said the Kennington Oval, *he* had thought she said Elephant and Castle?

" But did it not occur to you that the fare to the Oval must be more than threepence? "

The old lady rode this one off. She said that she always paid

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exactly what booking clerks asked for. In her experience, sometimes they asked for more, sometimes less. She never argued with them.

"And why," said Mr. Whitcomb, who believed in leaving no avenue unexplored, "if you had been given a ticket to Elephant and Castle in mistake for a ticket to the Oval, did you ultimately alight at Charing Cross?"

The old lady said she had mistaken it for Trafalgar Square.

It took some time to get this one sorted out—absolute discharge coupled with a severe warning—and Ronald Duckworth was called forward. Mr. Duckworth was charged with an act of wilful damage, committed on the premises of the London Passenger Transport Board, in that he, on the previous Tuesday, had attempted to tear down at Borough High Street Underground Station, a poster the property of Barleymow Breakfast Bricks Ltd., and advertising their wares.

Mr. Duckworth pleaded guilty; and an L.P.T.B. Inspector stated that at about five minutes past eleven on the evening before last, one of the porters at Borough High Street Station, a Mr. Sampson, returning to the platform, had observed the accused, who had apparently thought he was alone, seize a loose corner of the advertisement in question and tear it sharply in an upward direction.

"Are you perhaps not fond of Barleymow Breakfast Bricks?" inquired Mr. Whitcomb, with every evidence of sympathy.

Mr. Duckworth said, "No, it wasn't that; it was just an impulse."

Mr. Whitcomb said that such impulses, though understandable—he much preferred porridge himself—ought to be resisted. He ordered Mr. Duckworth to pay the costs of the prosecution and bound him over conditionally upon his undertaking to leave all posters—however offensive the products they advertised—alone for the next twelve months.

Mr. Duckworth departed thankfully. The next case was Petrella's, and it was not one which he viewed with any enthusiasm at all.

The charge against Albert Mundy was one of receiving goods, well knowing them to be stolen. The facts were simple enough. Mr. Mundy, an electrician working in the Wandsborough Power Station, had purchased a television set from a man he had met in the saloon bar of a public house. They had had a few drinks, and the man had told him a long story of a mix-up which had resulted in his being in possession of two television sets. "It's a brand new set," he said. "I've got it outside in the car now. I'd be glad to get rid of it for half what I gave for it."

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Mr. Mundy was not only an electrician. He knew quite a lot about television sets. It was, as he saw when he went to inspect it, a brand new set. The maker's and wholesaler's labels were still on it.

Even if, as Mr. Mundy half suspected, it contained some hidden defect, he was confident that he could put it right, and it was still a staggering bargain. He hurried home, produced the money from a reserve which he kept under a loose floorboard, and clinched the deal. The set proved to be in perfect condition. It also, unfortunately, turned out to have been one of a consignment of twelve stolen in transit between Manchester and Crossways Goods Depot; probably at the depot itself.

There was a good deal to be said on both sides. On the side of Mr. Mundy that he was an honest citizen with a hitherto unblemished record, and that he had no positive proof that this was a stolen set; on the side of the authorities that Mr. Mundy had himself admitted that he thought the deal a fishy one, and that people who buy television sets in ex-works condition for half the list price from strangers in public houses must take the consequences of their actions. There was a third powerful but unexpressed argument; that several million pounds' worth of goods were being lost every year by pilfering in transport.

It was a very close thing, and the sweat stood in beads on Mr. Mundy's forehead before the Magistrate finally decided to give weight to his previously blameless record and dismiss the case.

Petrella thought that substantial justice had been done. Mr. Mundy had been given a bad fright. To imprison him would have been bad luck on Mr. Mundy's family and would not have hurt the real criminals, those who stole and organised the stealing. For the losses were now so large and so regular that they had a look of organisation about them.

"We do what we can," said Sergeant Drage. "We can't watch the men at work. To do that properly you'd need one railway policeman for each worker. Anyway, most of them are honest enough. It's worst towards Christmas. More stuff about, and a lot of casual labour taken on for the season."

"If you can't watch them, how do you hope to stop them?"

"Keep your eyes and ears open. Make the places as difficult as we can to get in and out of, and organise snap searches when they come off duty."

"I see," said Petrella. "The old 'ring fence' system. You can't stop them taking things, but you make it difficult for them to get away with anything."

Superintendent Benjamin held monthly conferences at Causeway, which the Detective Inspectors in charge of stations

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attended. Petrella, from Gabriel Street, Groves from the Common, and Merriam from Tooley Street. In October, and again in November, the first item on his agenda, displacing even such established favourites as shoplifting and juvenile delinquency, was thefts from the railways.

"The insurance companies are starting to kick," said Benjamin. "They're bullying the Commissioner, the Commissioner's given a rocket to District, and the tail-end of the stick's landed on me."

"Isn't it really a job for the railway police?" asked Merriam.

"Surely," said Benjamin. "But once stuff's been stolen, it's our job, too. If they can't stop them lifting it, we must stop them disposing of it. At least, that's the idea. We've got three big goods yards plumb in our area.

"What I suggest is . . ."

He went on to lay down certain principles for patrolling outside these depots. They were sound enough, in their way, but his subordinates knew as well as Benjamin did that it was like trying to watch an acre of rabbit warren with one man and a dog.

It was in the second week of November that Mr. Duckworth reappeared in Mr. Whitcomb's Court. The charge this time had rather more serious elements in it.

It appeared that the staff of Southwark Underground Station had been on the point of closing down for the night. The last passenger train had gone through, and the last passenger, as they imagined, had been shepherded out into the street.

Happening to come down to the platform for a final look round, the porter had heard a suspicious noise from inside the cupboard where cleaning materials and other odds and ends were stored.

Being a man of discretion he had fetched the stationmaster and the ticket collector before investigating, and the three of them had then returned to the platform. The cupboard door was open, and the accused, who must have been hiding in it, was engaged in tearing down a number of posters affixed that morning to the wall of the station.

Mr. Duckworth looked even more embarrassed, again pleaded guilty, and said that he had acted upon impulse.

"As I said on the previous occasion," observed Mr. Whitcomb, "it is understandable that a man might have a sudden, and perhaps overmastering, impulse to tear down a poster. But to secrete yourself in a cupboard after the station had been closed for the night, and then come out and start systematically to pull down posters hardly seems to me to be conduct which would be properly described as impulsive."

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Mr. Duckworth said that he was very sorry.

Mr. Whitcomb, a copy of the record of the earlier case in front of him, pondered for a few minutes, and then announced that he was far from happy about the matter. He wished further inquiries to be made—the Court Missioner sighed audibly—and he would put back Mr. Duckworth's case for one week. He understood that he was a respectable family man. He could have bail on his own recognisances for seven days.

Petrella, who was in Court in connection with another matter, caught the Missioner at the door and said, "When you've finished with him, let me have a go at him."

"Have him first if you like," said the Missioner. "He's daft as a coot. His mother was probably frightened by a railway poster when she was a girl."

"I'm not sure," said Petrella. He had, by now, a fairly extensive knowledge of the cranks, crackpots, and fanatics who take up so much police time and afford entertaining copy for the court reporters of the leading evening newspapers; but he was far from convinced that Mr. Duckworth was one of them.

So he took him out and bought him a cup of tea, and listened with infinite patience to the story of his life. Mr. Duckworth was an interior decorator, and an amateur soldier of the late war, during which he had served with credit in an artillery regiment, rising to the rank of sergeant. He had a wife and three children, whose photographs Petrella inspected. He was a supporter of Charlton Athletic and a keen darts player. And, he added pugnaciously, there was nothing at all wrong with his eyes,

Petrella felt that they might be approaching the heart of the mystery. He ordered a second cup of tea for both of them.

"Nothing wrong with my eyes at all," said Mr. Duckworth.

"Who suggested there was?" asked Petrella.

"No one actually suggested it," said Mr. Duckworth crossly. "It was just that—look here, if I tell you this story, will you promise not to laugh at me?"

"I never laugh on duty," said Petrella.

"No, I mean that. It's—it's quite mad. It's—it's sort of—fourth dimensional. You know what I mean."

"Science fiction," suggested Petrella helpfully.

"That's right, that's just what I mean. You walk out of one life into another. That's why I'd rather people thought I was a crook than they thought I was cracked, if you follow me."

"Lots of people think like that," said Petrella. "Just you tell me about it."

It was, in its elements, quite a simple story. Mr. Duckworth had been at a reunion at the Regimental Headquarters in North

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London, a function he attended annually and which was, as he put it, "the one time in the year I really let my hair down." Being an old soldier, before plunging into the fray, he had carefully secured his line of retreat. The nearest station was Archway on the Northern Line. His home station was Colliers Wood, at the southern end of the same line. The last train left Archway at four minutes before midnight.

With these essential facts firmly engraved on his memory, Mr. Duckworth had settled down to enjoy himself in congenial company, had drunk quite a few pints of beer and a couple—but, he thought, not more than a couple—of whiskies, and had caught his train with some minutes to spare. As soon as the train started, he had gone to sleep.

An unknown number of minutes later he had woken with a start, with the strong conviction that he had reached his own station, and was about to be carried past it. The train, sure enough, was stationary, and the doors open. There was not a moment to lose. Fortunately he was sitting in a seat near to and facing the doors, and as they closed he had hurled himself between them. Behind him, the doors shut and the train jerked into motion and disappeared. A solitary porter in the far distance disappeared also, leaving Mr. Duckworth, still dazed from the joint effects of sleep and violent exertion, alone on the platform.

His overmastering desire was to sit down somewhere for a few minutes to recuperate. Behind him, at the very far end of the platform, was a recess which had possibly once contained a seat. It seemed to Mr. Duckworth to be exactly what he wanted. He got his back comfortably against one end, his feet against the other, and settled down to a period of reflection.

When he opened his eyes, he was in darkness. A sort of dim blue darkness, broken by one very bright light.

His head, he said, was comparatively clear. He had found that before. However much beer he drank, give him half an hour's sleep, and he'd be more or less all right.

Petrella interrupted to say, "How long do you think you had been asleep?"

Difficult to say, said Mr. Duckworth, but not, he thought, more than half an hour. He had then staggered to his feet, and had seen that the bright light ahead of him was a small floodlight at platform level. It was so placed that it lit up the platform side of the station which, he was clear-headed enough to note, was not one of the modern type, all gleaming tiles and cement, but an old-fashioned one with upright wooden hoardings. The light, as he observed when he drew level with it, was shining directly

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on one of these hoardings. Almost as if it had been placed there purposely to illuminate it; the effect being emphasised by the fact that the hoardings on either side of it were blank.

"I take it," said Petrella, "you'd realised by this time you weren't at Colliers Wood?"

"Oh yes. I realised I'd jumped off the train too soon and should have a long walk home. I wasn't worried about being locked in the station. If there were lights on, there must be people still working. The next bit is something I can't remember very clearly at all. I thought I heard a noise behind me—a sort of scraping noise, and then the ceiling fell on me. Or that's what it felt like. Something very hard and heavy landed on top of my head and, before I had time to feel anything else, I was falling forward and—next thing I knew, I was opening my eyes. It was five o'clock of a perishing grey morning, and I was on a seat, just off the road, in the middle of South Borough Common."

He waited, defiantly, for comment.

Petrella said, "You might have dreamt it all, of course. Someone might have given you a lift back from the reunion and tried to find out where you lived; you were too pickled to give him your address, so he propped you up on the seat to cool off. Not very friendly, but it could have happened."

"All right," said Mr. Duckworth. "Then how do you account for the fact that I'd still got my ticket with me? I found it in my waistcoat pocket."

"Then," agreed Petrella, "it might have happened just as you said. You butted in on something you weren't meant to see, and got slugged, and dumped."

"I thought that out for myself," said Mr. Duckworth. "Only not quite as quickly, because I had a nasty lump on the back of my head—that wasn't imaginary. It was sore as hell—and the father and mother of a hangover—and I had my wife to deal with. She'd got into a real state and gone to the police, and then when I turned up—"

"I can imagine that bit," said Petrella.

"Yes, well, I thought about it, and I had the same idea as you. I thought I'd start by finding what station it was."

"That shouldn't have been too difficult," said Petrella. "Most of the stations on that bit of line have been modernised and, besides, you saw at least one of the advertisements. The one the light was shining on."

"That's just it," said Mr. Duckworth.

"*Didn't* you see it?"

"Yes, I did. And I wish I hadn't. It's been getting me down. Here's where you've got not to laugh. What I saw, and I saw

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it quite clearly, and if I shut my eyes I can see it now, was three lines of writing, with one word on each line. It said: GET HERRING JAM."

Petrella stared at him.

"Be honest," said Mr. Duckworth. "Isn't that where you start thinking I've got a screw loose? If you do, you're not the only one. I began to think so myself."

Petrella said, "You say you can visualise it clearly. What sort of print was it, and how was it arranged?"

"Ordinary capital letters. On the large side, but not enormous. The GET was on the top and a bit to the left. The middle line was HERRING—that ran right across. The JAM was on the bottom line—a bit to the right."

"I see," said Petrella. "I suppose there isn't some other advertisement rather like—"

"I've been up and down every perishing station between Waterloo and Balham twenty times, and there's nothing like it at all. Most of 'em are pictures of girls. There's some in writing, like notices telling you to buy Premium Bonds and drink somebody or other's stout."

"But no herrings?"

"Not a fish among 'em. That's how I got the idea that it was an advertisement that had been covered up with another one. They change 'em about once a week. So—"

Light dawned on Petrella.

"So you started pulling off the new ones to see what the old ones were."

"It'd sort of got me by that time," said Mr. Duckworth. "I can't explain it. But what I felt was, if I can find that advert, then perhaps I can find out what happened to me that night—if I can't, well, I'm mad. I expect you think I'm mad, anyway."

"No," said Petrella slowly. "I don't think you're mad."

He said the same thing to Mr. Wetherall that evening.

Mr. Wetherall was headmaster of the South Borough Secondary School, and when Petrella had fallen out with two landladies in succession—in both cases over the peculiar hours he kept and his excessive use of the telephone—he had suggested to Petrella that he set up house in the two empty rooms below his own in the big house in Brinkman Road. It was a bit far from Gabriel Street, but otherwise it suited Petrella perfectly.

It had been great fun furnishing the rooms, and he enjoyed an occasional after-dinner gossip with Mr. Wetherall.

"I don't think I'd have started trespassing and pulling down advertisements," said Mr. Wetherall. "I'd have gone to one of the big agents who does advertising on the Underground, and

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asked him what advertisements had been showing that week."

"*You* might have," said Petrella, "and so might I. And the agent might have told us. But not someone like Mr. Duckworth."

"Have you located the station?"

"I've had a shot at it. The trouble is, that going from Archway to Colliers Wood, Mr. Duckworth could have gone one of two ways. Via Charing Cross—that's the West End route. Or via Bank. All the stations on the West End route are modern tile-and-chromium jobs. But one or two of the stations on the Bank route would fit. Southwark and Borough High Street are both possibles."

"Since you've done some work on it, I take it you don't think he made the whole thing up?"

"No, I don't," said Petrella. "But I'm damned if I could explain why."

Mr. Wetherall puffed his horrible pipe for a few seconds and then said, "No, you can't, can you? I mean, you can't tell how you know when people are telling the truth, but it's a fact that you can. I've found that often with boys."

He reflected again, and said, "I think you'd better have a word with my friend, Raynor-Hasset. He'll tell you all you want to know about the London railway system. He used to be a schoolmaster, but he's retired now. He lives in one of those little houses on the Heath. I'll let him know you're coming."

Petrella knew that Mr. Wetherall seldom made recommendations idly. So the following evening he called on Mr. Raynor-Hasset. Mr. Wetherall's friend had a corvine face and a slight stoop as if much of his life had been spent in exploring places with low roofs.

"I don't imagine," he said, when they had settled down in front of the fire, "that you have ever heard of the Spurs?"

"The Spurs?"

"Not the football team," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset, with a thin smile. "The Society for the Preservation of Unused Railway-lines. I have the honour to be their secretary."

"I'm afraid not," said Petrella. "What do you do?"

"Just as spelaeologists explore the recesses and convolutions of our caves, we delight in tracking down the railway lines which run under this great city. It is a curious fact, but once a railway line has been constructed, it may be covered over, but it is hardly ever filled in again."

"I suppose not."

"Most people imagine, when they think about it, that our main railway lines stop well short of the centre of London. The

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northern ones at Euston, King's Cross, and St. Pancras. The southern ones at Waterloo and Victoria. It is far from true, of course. I could name you half a dozen ways of crossing London from north to south by steam train. I conducted a special trip along the Blackfriars—Holborn—Kentish Town line myself last year. And did you know that there was an old, but still usable railway line, part of the original Charing Cross—Bayswater switch, that runs within a hundred yards of the Eros statue in Piccadilly? The entrance to it is through a shop . . ."

Petrella listened, entranced, as Mr. Raynor-Hasset described and expounded to him that curious system of disused passages and tunnels, of unsuspected tracks, forgotten stairways, and phantom stations, akin to the traces in the human system of some dread but dead disease, which the private enterprise of our railway pioneers had left under the surface of London.

During an interval, while his host brewed cocoa for them, he explained the idea which had come into his head.

Mr. Raynor-Hasset cleared the table and spread on it a map of large scale. " It's quite a feasible idea," he said.

" I think the Crossways Goods Yard would be the one to start with. You have had losses from there? Serious losses.

" You'll note that although it is now linked to London Bridge by part of the ordinary Southern system, its previous history is far from simple. It began life as a private depot for goods coming up the river to St. Saviour's Dock—a horsedrawn tramway connected it to Dockhead, or you could get at it under the river by the old subway—it's disused now—that came out at Stanton's Wharf. Plenty of possibilities there.

" As for the Underground stations—" Mr. Raynor-Hasset shook his head—" if people had any idea what lay behind those shiny, well-lit platforms, they'd be pretty surprised."

He consulted his chart again. " If I had to make a guess I'd say that the connection lies between Crossways and Southwark. And I'll tell you why. Southwark Underground must be within a very short distance of the connecting line which the old Brighton and South Coast—who shared London Bridge with the South-eastern and Chatham—ran across to Waterloo. It was never a great success, as passengers found it just as easy to go straight through from London Bridge, and it was closed to traffic in the eighties. You can see it marked here."

Petrella followed the spidery lines on the map and found his excitement kindling.

" I really believe," he said, " that you must be right."

" No need to rely on guesswork. Why don't we go and see? "

Petrella looked at him.

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"With your official standing," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset, "and my experience, I should anticipate no difficulty. I take it you can square it with the authorities."

"Yes, certainly."

"Then I suggest tomorrow night. We will meet at—shall we say, eleven o'clock at Bermondsey South? The old station, on the north side of the Rotherhithe New Road. Dress in your oldest clothes."

At a few minutes after eleven the next night, Petrella was following Mr. Raynor-Hasset down a flight of wooden steps. At the bottom of the steps a man was waiting for them.

"I've opened her up," he said. "Had to use a pint of oil. Must be five years since anyone went through there."

"Almost exactly five years," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset. "I took a party along there myself. Thank you very much, Sam." Some coins changed hands. "You lock up behind. We'll probably be coming out at Waterloo."

"I'll give 'em a ring," said Sam. The door opened into what looked, at first sight, like a brick wall, but which was in fact the bricked-up entrance to a railway tunnel. It shut behind them with a solid thud, cutting off light, air, and sound.

"I should have asked you before we started," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset, "whether you suffered at all from claustrophobia."

"I don't think so," said Petrella. "I've never really had a chance of finding out."

"One man I took with me was so severely overcome that he fell flat on his face, and when I endeavoured to comfort him he bit me in the left leg. Straight ahead now."

It was quite easy going. The rails had gone, and the old permanent way had become covered, in the course of time, by a thin deposit of dried earth mixed with soot from the tunnel roof. The only discomfort was the dust they kicked up as they walked.

"Ventilation is sometimes a problem," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset. "It was originally quite adequate but one or two of the shafts have become blocked with the passage of time. In a really old tunnel I have used a safety lamp, but we should be all right here." He paused to consult the map, and a pedometer which was strapped on to his boot. "There's an air shaft somewhere here. Yes. You can catch a glimpse of the sky."

Petrella looked up a narrow opening and was pleased to see the stars winking back at him. The torchlight shone on something white. It was a tiny heap of bones.

"A dog, I should imagine," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset. "On we go. We've much ground to cover."

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They went on in silence. Petrella soon lost count of time and distance. His guide used his torch sparingly and, as they paced forward into the blackness, Petrella began to feel the oppression of the entombed, a consciousness of the weight of earth above him. The air grew thicker, and was there—or was it his imagination—an increasing difficulty in breathing?

"We must," he said, his voice coming out in a startling croak, "we must be nearly the other side of London by now."

Mr. Raynor-Hasset halted, clicked on his torch, and said, "One mile and nearly one furlong. By my calculations we are just passing under Bricklayers Arms Depot. We go past the north-east corner, and then we should swing through nearly a quarter turn to the right. Yes, here we are. We had better keep an eye open for possible entrances on our left."

He kept his torch alight for two hundred yards, but the brick walls remained unbroken. Ahead of them pink beads winked and flashed in the light, retreating before them.

"Rats," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset, "but a timid bunch. I carry a few Guy Fawkes squibs with me to throw at them, but I've never had to use them."

They paced on in silence.

Petrella, who was gradually becoming acclimatised, calculated that they had gone forward another mile when Mr. Raynor-Hasset spoke again. "Can you feel," he said, "a slight dampness?"

"It's less dusty, certainly."

"There's a water seepage here. Nothing serious. Some defect in drainage. We must be almost under the old Leather-market."

Petrella tried to visualise the geography of that part of London.

"In that case," he said, "we shouldn't be far from Crossways."

"About two hundred yards."

The torch came on. Ahead of them the surface shone, black and slimy. The smell was unspeakable. Even Mr. Raynor-Hasset noticed it. "Quite fresh, isn't it?" he said. "We'll keep the torch on now for a bit."

When they came to it, the side entrance was easy to see. It sloped upwards, gently, to the right. Mr. Raynor-Hasset took a compass bearing, and marked his map.

"I should think there's no doubt at all," he said. "That's an old loading track, and it goes straight to Crossways Depot. You'll probably find it comes out in a loading pit. Do you wish to follow it?"

But Petrella's eyes were on the ground. "Could you point

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your torch here a moment," he said. "Look. *That's* not five years old." It was a new-looking cigarette carton.

"No, indeed," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset. "And those, I think, are footprints. How very interesting."

Clearly to be seen in the mud, a beaten track of men's boot-prints led from the mouth of the shaft onwards up the tunnel.

"Keep your torch on them," said Petrella. "This is going to save me a lot of trouble."

"It looks as if an army has passed this way." An army of soldier-ants, thought Petrella. An army bearing burdens.

Four hundred yards, and the line of footprints turned into a track branching down to the left.

Mr. Raynor-Hasset again checked his position, and said, "Southwark Underground Station, or I'm a Dutchman."

They went sharply down for a short distance, then the track levelled out, ran along, and climbed again, finally emerging into a circular ante-chamber. Above their heads an iron staircase spiralled upwards into the gloom.

"Southwark," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset, "was one of those stations which was developed forward. I mean that when they redesigned it, they put in a moving staircase at the far end with the lifts, and closed the old emergency stair shaft altogether. That is what we have come out into."

But Petrella was not listening to him.

The light of the torch had shown, strewn round the foot of the staircase, an astonishing jumble of cartons, crates, boxes, sacks, paper wrappings, and containers of every shape and size.

"This is where they unpack the stuff," he said. "I wonder where they store it. Can we get out on to the platform?"

"Certainly. I think this must be the way." There was a door in the boarding ahead of them, secured by three stout bolts.

"What time is it?"

"Just after two o'clock."

"Should be all right," said Petrella. He slid the bolts and swung the door open. They stepped through, and found themselves on the platform of Southwark Underground Station, lit only by the ghostly blue lamps which shine all night to guide the maintenance trolleys.

"What are we looking for?" said Mr. Raynor-Hasset.

"There must, I rather think, be a further storage space. Have you got a knife? It would be about here, I'd guess. Hold the torch steady a moment."

Petrella slid the blade between the boards, choosing the place with precision. He felt a latch lifting, and levered with the knife blade. A section of boarding hinged out towards them.

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" Good gracious," said Mr. Raynor-Hasset mildly. The deep recess contained, stacked on shelves and floor, an astonishing assortment of goods. There were piled cartons of cigarettes, wooden boxes with the stamp of a well-known whisky firm, portable typewriters, wireless and television sets, bales of textiles, a pair of sporting rifles, boxes of shoes, cases of tinned food.

" A producer-to-consumer service," said Petrella grimly. His mind was busy constructing exactly the sort of police trap that would be necessary. Two cars in the street above, to catch the people when they came to collect. Men in the tunnel itself, beyond the opening, to seal the far end. A very cautious reconnaissance to find out how the Crossways end worked.

He was standing on the platform, thinking about all this, when suddenly he started to laugh. Mr. Raynor-Hasset edged perceptibly away from him.

" It's quite all right," said Petrella. " I'm not going to start biting you in the leg. Hold the torch on that wall. Now watch, while I open and shut those two doors."

Mr. Raynor-Hasset did so, and then himself gave a dry cackle. " Very ingenious," he said.

Two advertisements stood next to each other on the hoarding. The left-hand one read:

THIS YEAR'S TARGET
BUY YOURSELF ANOTHER
PREMIUM BOND

and the one on the right of it:

RING PARK 0906
JAMES BONE & SONS
Everything for your car

When both doors were opened, this had the effect of neatly cutting away all but the right-hand few letters of the advertisement on the left and the left-hand letters of the one on the right.

" I couldn't help thinking," said Petrella, " that we have, at least, set Mr. Duckworth's mind at rest."

★ ★ ★

RAILLERY

This is the thing that puzzles me
Nothing goes off the rails at sea,
But nothing on the other hand
Ever goes swimmingly on land.

GEORGE ROSTREVOR HAMILTON, *Admiral*

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LONG WHITE SCAR

There was a cold savagery in his voice

BY BRIAN CLEEVE

I HEARD her calling me from a long way away. "Paul . . . Paul . . ." Her voice very lonely in the wide silence of the evening.

A small wind shook the reeds where I lay hidden, and far out in the lagoon the flamingoes lifted their scythe-shaped, serpent heads to listen. I lay flat, my chin pressed into the wet sand, my body growing cold.

"Paul . . . Paul . . ."

I stared through the fringe of reeds at the shallow, steel-bright water; at the sandbanks beyond, dark and glistening; at the clumps and barriers of reeds, thickening towards the west where the shallow sea lagoons and sandbars became marshland, sea and land blending, melting into one another; channels of deeper water twisting and winding through the reeds; here and there an island of soil rising a few centimetres above the marsh, bound together by tough, salt-withered grass and the roots of a pine tree; quicksands, shining and trembling like wet, hungry mouths, waiting to suck down any foot that trod on them. Flat and desolate and lonely as my heart.

I felt so lonely I could have cried out like a bird. And yet I didn't want Léonie to find me. I didn't know what I wanted. Only to lie here, perhaps, and watch the flamingoes for ever; watch them sweeping their scythe beaks through the shallow water, feeding. Watch the sunset.

I didn't even know any more why we had quarrelled. We never used to. All the time in school we never quarrelled. And then we used to look forward to now, to the time when school was finished for ever, and all the length of the days was our own to do what we liked in.

To take the skiff far out beyond the last sandbank and fish in the sea. To lie like this all day and watch the wild duck and the flamingoes. To do nothing. To do everything. And yet now that we could, it wasn't the same. Nothing was the same.

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"Paul, Paul." She was very near now. The first of the flamingoes opened his great black-and-scarlet wings in fright, and began to run. The others followed him, awkward and ungainly as if running on wooden stilts, their wings beating like great coloured sails.

"There you are," Léonie said.

I didn't look round at her. They were flying now, their long spider-legs trailing, skimming the silver water, the sandbank, the tops of the reeds.

"Why did you run away and hide?"

"I don't know."

She threw herself down, and began digging at the sand with her fingers.

"Do you want to know something?"

"I don't mind."

In the sunset her hair was red as well as gold, and her eyes were quite green. Like a cat's. I wanted desperately to be nice to her, but I couldn't. I looked back at the flamingoes, far away now, their legs folded, their bodies no more than cinders against the reddening sky.

"There are two strangers at your house."

I sat up at that. Strangers almost never came to the marshland. How long had it been since the last one, the man who had come to ring the wild duck? Two years? Three?

"What do they want?"

"Why don't you come home and find out?" she asked. She looked at me from under her eyelashes, a queer, sideways kind of look, her fingers still digging in the sand. The new way she had of looking. The one I didn't understand. It made me feel strange. As if I didn't know her any more.

"Why do you look at me in that stupid way?" I said. And quite suddenly she was furious, her face flaming, her eyes like green fire.

"Stupid yourself," she hissed, and flung a handful of sand in my face. But I saw it coming and closed my eyes in time. Then I was on to her, my hands gripping her shoulders, pushing her down on the sand.

"I'll teach you," I said. "Wait till I get you down. I'll fill your mouth with sand, you little pig."

She fought back in silence, twisting, punching at my face, trying to kick.

It was only in the last year that I had become stronger than she, and she could still hold me off for a time.

I began to laugh. It was like it had always been. "Just wait," I said.

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She snarled in my face and tried to bite, and I put my head down against hers to protect myself, pressing my face into the curve of her neck, between the collar of her old, green shirt and the line of her jaw. It was warm and smooth, and I could feel the blood pulsing under the skin, against my mouth. Pulsing. Throbbing.

Without knowing what I was doing I let go of her arms, slid my own arms round her body, kissed the warm, brown skin of her throat.

She stopped fighting, rubbed her face against mine, whispered in my ear, "Oh Paul, oh Paul."

I lifted my head and looked at her, and I couldn't understand anything. My hands fell away from her as if they were afraid to touch her any more. My mouth was half open, and I couldn't breathe.

She smiled, tilting her head sideways, looking at me through her lashes. "Do you want to know about the strangers?"

I nodded, not knowing what else to do.

"They're staying in your house for the night. One of them is quite old, with a crutch. But the other one is young." She leaned forward and grinned in my face. "And handsome. Much handsomer than you, you silly old sourpuss."

She snapped her fingers under my nose and was up on her feet and away, waiting for me to chase her, her face a flame of devilment, bending down, ready to throw sand if I came for her.

"Sourpuss. Sourpuss."

Then she was gone among the reeds, and I heard her laughter fading as she ran . . .

I followed her slowly. She was always like that these days. What was wrong with her? It had never been that way before. We had been together like two hands. We'd understood each other without even talking, and if we fought it was only because we wanted to fight.

But now . . . I remembered the warmth and softness of her throat against my lips, and my face burnt as if she was still there, as if my arms were still holding her. Was it, could it . . .?

I pushed the thought out of my mind, somehow frightened and ashamed. Not wanting to think it. Not even knowing really what it was. Just silliness, that was all. That was all it was. Girl's silliness.

I splashed in a shallow pool with my feet, and felt better. And as the path twisted through the marsh, the reeds growing thicker and taller the nearer it came to the island, I began to wonder about the strangers.

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Why had they come? Except for other fishermen and hunters like Léonie's father and mine, no one ever came. It was five kilometres to the island, rowing in the skiff across the lagoons and through the channels.

The reeds fell away from either side of the path, the ground became firmer under foot, lifted slightly on to our island, and I was home. Two cabins, a hundred metres from one another, separated by a stretch of rough, tussocky grass and reeds: Léonie's parents' cabin was at the far end of the island, ours at this end.

Pierre, my smallest brother, lay inside his little fence under the low, twisted, pine tree with its flat top like a green sunshade, and a black kitten played with him, hopping in and out of the shadows. The other children wouldn't be back from school till dark.

I went softly to the window of the cabin and looked in. And there they were, the two strangers, sitting one on either side of the black, iron stove, drinking soup out of our bowls. I could smell it through the open window, and it made me realise that I was hungry. But I was too interested to move for a little while.

One was old, all right, but not that old. Not as old as my father. The stubble of his beard was grey, and his moustache; but his eyebrows still had black in them. Thick, twisting eyebrows knotting over a hook of a nose.

I couldn't see if he was tall, but his shoulders were very big, hunched with muscle. You could see how strong they were, even under his thick, grey coat.

The other one wasn't handsome at all. A pointed chin and a small, thin mouth almost like a girl's. But not a bit like Léonie's. He had a scar at one side of it, so white I could see it even in the half darkness of the room. A long, white scar running from the corner of his mouth almost to his ear.

Beyond him my mother was cutting bread against her chest, and she must have seen the outline of my head in the window.

"Paul!"

"Yes, Maman." She rules the house, and when she calls like that it's best either to come or to go very quickly. I ran round to the front and made my entrance as best I could, ducking my knee to the strangers.

They looked up at my coming, and then the young one went on eating, not interested in me. But the older one lifted an eyebrow and beckoned me with his spoon.

"So you're the big son of the house?"

"Yes, monsieur."

My father looked up from where he was mending a bird-net in the corner, smiling his secret, faraway smile, as if he could hear

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what was being said. But he can only hear the birds crying and whistling. Those he can hear farther than I can.

"The two messieurs are staying for the night," said my mother. "They will sleep in here with you." She gave the two men bread, a thick slice to each on the point of the knife.

"Are you a clever boy?" said the older one, munching his bread after he had dipped it in his soup. I wondered if there was going to be enough soup for me.

"I said, 'Are you clever?'" And suddenly there was such a cold savagery in his voice that I felt it catch my throat.

"N-no, monsieur. Not very . . ."

My mother came forward and tapped the point of the black-handled breadknife against his chest. "He's clever enough for what you mean," she said.

She looked at me over her shoulder. "They're sleeping here, paying good money, and going at dawn. There'll be no need to say anything of them to anyone. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"And you—" she turned back to the older man—"you can pay me now. One thousand francs each." I caught my breath at that; it was a fortune for just a bowl of soup and a space by the stove. The man smiled, putting down his spoon on his broad knee, sliding his fingers into some deep inside-pocket to pull out two mille notes.

"There you are," he said, still smiling down at the point of my mother's knife, as if he recognised in her a hardness the equal of his own. "No questions, eh? And no lies, and no memories?"

"That's right," said my mother. "We're poor folk here and don't hit money in the face. There's no call for me to ask you questions if you want a bed and soup."

I stared at her in astonishment. My mother had never done anything in her life simply for money. Sometimes in the market she wouldn't sell at any price if she didn't like the look of the customer.

There was the time I was nursing the flamingo with the broken wing. Monsieur Doubs had heard about it and had come to offer us five thousand francs for the bird.

I still remembered the look in her face as she had said, "We don't sell living creatures here, monsieur." And strangely enough there was that same look in her face now. Under the hardness. As if she was sorry for them, and didn't want them to know it.

I would have liked to ask them if they were running away from prison, because Léonie and I had seen a film just like that, but I didn't dare. Instead I asked for my supper.

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" There," said my mother. " And don't ask for more."

I took my bowl and sat on the fishbox in the corner beside my father, watching his lean, brown fingers shape and pull and tap at the knots of the net. He glanced sideways at me, giving the slightest of nods towards the strangers, lifting one thin eyebrow, and pushing out his lower lip. His face said as clearly as words, " They're no good." Then he shrugged, as much as to say, Your mother!

I smiled, and he smiled, and we understood one another as if we had one heart . . .

I heard the skiff beaching behind the house, and a moment later my three school-going brothers tumbled into the room, to be struck dumb by the sight of the strangers. They sat down in a row on the bench by the door, their satchels between their dirty knees, their eyes like buttons. The two strangers looked at them, and at that moment Léonie came in.

She had changed out of her shorts and shirt into her Sunday dress. It was red and too small for her now, showing her knees; too tight everywhere, so that it looked stupid. But she was very proud of it. And she came into the middle of the room and stood looking at the two men, and then at my mother, with a small, impudent lift of her head.

I could see my mother's right hand itching to smack her face for being so inquisitive as to come in at our supper-time, but she wouldn't in front of the strangers.

The one with the scar looked up at Léonie and smiled, putting his bowl down under the stool. A kitten came out from under the cupboard and began to lick it.

" What's your name? " said the stranger. It was the first time he'd spoken. He hadn't bothered to ask my name.

" Léonie. And what's yours? "

" Mind your own business," said my mother, but the stranger laughed, the scar puckering in his cheek. He had looked sullen and bored before, just eating his soup and saying nothing. But now he looked quite alive.

" They call me the Para," he said. " And they call him Ti-tic—" he pointed to the crutch beside the other man— " because when he walks he makes a noise. Ti-tic. Ti-tic." He laughed.

" I walk as fast as others," said Ti-tic. " Faster than some."

" And why do they call you the Para? " asked Léonie.

" Your mother will be wanting to give you supper," said my mother, handing out bowls to my brothers.

" I've eaten," said Léonie.

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She sat on the floor near to the two strangers, coiling down very slowly because if she went too fast she'd burst her dress. " Why do they call you the Para? "

" Because I was a Para," said the man, as if he was saying, I was a King. " A red beret. A paratrooper."

Ti-tic gave a short, harsh laugh, and wiped his moustache with his sleeve. " Some paratrooper! "

The Para's face went pale and ugly with anger. " Don't mind him. He's jealous, the old gimp. Ti-tic, Ti-tic," he sneered. " He doesn't like to hear me talk. I could tell you stories—" He looked round the room. " We're all friends here, eh? " He looked at my brothers as if he'd petrify them where they sat, and they stiffened into excited silence, their eyes wide and staring. Then the Para looked at Léonie, his mouth twisting as if with the wealth of stories pressing behind it to be told.

" Tell us! " breathed Léonie. She leaned towards him, teasing him, the way she does when she's making fun of me, pretending to be gasping to hear something, although she's never really much interested in any stories but her own. But, of course, the Para couldn't know that, and he leaned back and preened himself, thinking he was tantalising us.

My mother snorted, angry with everyone, and went out to feed the baby under the tree.

" Go on! " said Léonie. I expected her to look at me and wink, but she didn't.

" Well," said the Para, " there was a time south of Marrakesh. A band of rebels was making for the mountains, for a narrow pass, and we were to cut them off. They dropped us at night, fifty of us. Fifty! Against three hundred rebels! Six to one. But we didn't care. A para is equal to any ten other men. So we dropped into the pass at night, see . . ."

He made floating gestures with his hands and against my will I began to see the great, white, mushroom domes of the parachutes opening, floating down, like sleeping swans riding on the slow river of the stars.

". . . burp guns and mortars. You should've heard them scream as the first blasts of fire hit them."

" Ooooh! " whispered Léonie, putting her knuckles to her mouth, widening her eyes, pretending terror. My brothers on the bench gasped in chorus.

" And there was a time when three of us were taken prisoner. They were going to torture us . . ."

My father was watching the Para's face. Although he can't hear, he can read lips. Now he looked at me, pursing his mouth and shaking his head very slightly, as if he didn't believe what

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the Para was saying. I was glad of that, because my father always knew, and I could tell Léonie afterwards. She might still only be pretending to be interested, but I wasn't quite sure any longer.

" And then another time . . ."

An hour must have gone by, and still he had stories. Wounds he had had, and escapes. How he had hunted down the rebel who slashed his face, and how he had won the Médaille Militaire.

The sun went down, and outside it was twilight, with darkness coming. For a long time Ti-tic had been slouched on his stool with his head sunk into his great shoulders and his eyes shut, breathing deeply and easily, as if he was asleep. Now he sat up and yawned.

" Still yapping? " he said. " Turn it off, little Para, and let everyone get to bed. We'll be moving before dawn."

" That's right," said my mother. " The children have to be in bed." She clapped her hands, and my brothers scattered off the bench like birds.

She looked at Léonie, and reluctantly Léonie uncoiled herself and stood up. " If I was a man I'd be a para," she sighed.

The Para nodded, smiling his twisted smile, tapping his chest. " You have to have it here," he said.

He watched her as she went out, walking slowly and affectedly. And still he smiled, watching her go. I felt very glad that he would be gone by morning.

My father folded away his net, and began to spread out the palliasse that Ti-tic and the Para would be sleeping on. My mother took up the baby from his box in the corner, where she had laid him after his feed, and carried him with her into the other room, drawing across the curtain that separated it from us.

" Good night, messieurs," she said.

Ti-tic lay down, groaning softly as he settled his bad leg into place with his hands, his crutch on the earth floor beside him.

" I'm going out for a minute," said the Para, jerking his head at the pale oblong of the door. It was quite dark by now inside the room.

I lay down in my corner and heard my father padding across to the curtain. Then it was quiet. A cold draught whispered in from the open door, touching my face. But there was no point in shutting it until the Para came back.

I lay and waited, already half asleep. But for the draught I would have been quite asleep.

Five minutes. Ten. What could he be doing? Had he lost his way? It could be dangerous for him if he had gone far. But why should he go far?

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I slid out of my blankets and went to the door. After the darkness of the room it seemed almost light outside. In the west there were still the red embers of the twilight, and in the east, a quarter of the moon. He couldn't lose his way in that.

"Monsieur le Para," I called softly. There was no answer. I went round the side of the house to the back. He wasn't there.

I looked the length of the island to Léonie's house. The rough grass and reeds lay bare as silver under the moon. Léonie's house. Could he be there? Telling her more stories? But her parents would be going to bed, too, by now. And their house was dark. I began walking towards it, puzzled.

I must have been halfway there when I heard Léonie cry out. A sudden, thin cry of terror shut off as suddenly as it began, like a stream of water from a tap. I started to run.

It had come from beyond her house, a long way beyond. And there was only one path that way, leading for a few hundred metres into the marsh. Beyond it again there were quicksands.

I ran down the path like a hare, twisting along its turns and corners without so much as thinking of them, my feet finding them by old habit, my heart pounding. What could have happened? What could be happening to her?

And yet when I saw it, I seemed to have already known. They were on a wide patch of tufted grass, clear in the moon. And the Para was strangling her. Forcing her down and down, on to her knees, back and back, while she fought like a cat, not able to scream any more because her throat was choking, but clawing at his face, at his arms, baring her teeth, her face dark red with fury, the blood forced into it by his hands.

I ran at him, bending down to claw up sand in both my hands. As he turned I flung it into his eyes and his open, panting mouth.

Léonie was out of his grip in a flash, and I heard the long, rasping sob of her breath as she dragged it into her lungs.

"Run," I shouted. "Run." He lunged for me, and I threw more sand before I dodged away. He went staggering past me, blinded, thrashing with his hands at the moonlight.

Then Léonie was beside me, sobbing with short, dry gasps of fury. "The swine," she said. "The dirty swine. We'll teach him."

She caught my arm, dragging me towards the path, turning not towards home, but away from it, towards the quicksands.

The Para had cleared his eyes now, and was coming again, his face twisted, his hands stretched out to grip us. He seemed enormous, towering over us like a tree. We ran. Not very fast, because of Léonie's dress. But it didn't matter because the Para

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didn't know the path, and half the time he was splashing knee deep in water. The path grew thin, and the water stood among the reeds in black, oily sheets. It became a series of grass hummocks that squelched under our feet, tilting and sinking as we jumped on them.

"Let him get close," whispered Léonie. But he was close already.

"Now!" she screamed, and we leapt sideways on to a small island of hard sand. But the Para went straight on. Knee deep. Waist deep. And the quicksand sucked and bubbled round him, hidden under its inch-deep camouflage of water.

We stood and watched him as he tried to get back to us, twisting in the grip of the sand. He seemed to make half a step, but his feet didn't move forward. Only his body leaned, dipping forward and down into the wet. I saw the shudder coming on his face as he realised he couldn't move. And he seemed quite small, not enormous the way he had just now.

"Get me out of this," he said.

Léonie laughed. "You're going to drown," she said. And I was shocked myself at the sound of hatred in her voice. The Para began to beat the water round him. Even then he didn't understand. "It's quicksand," said Léonie. "Do you know what that is, Monsieur le Para? Monsieur le héros?"

He looked at her, and all the colour sank out of his face. His mouth hung open, and he began to make a little rattling noise in his throat, like a baby beginning to cry.

"No," he whispered. "Not that . . ." And then he screamed. "Get me out, get me out, get me out!"

A flight of ducks rattled into the air from a creek beside us, frightened by the noise.

"I wanted it to be like the films," said Léonie, half to me, half to the Para. "Walking out with a boy."

He stared at her as if she was mad, but I understood. On the films you see girls going out with boys, and looking tenderly at each other, and whispering, and holding hands, and going to shooting galleries, until one day they get married. And inland they do those things in real life, too. But in the marshland there were only ourselves.

"He caught me up just before I went indoors," Léonie whispered. "And said he'd tell me more stories if I'd go for a walk with him. I thought it would be just like the films . . . and then . . . and then . . ."

"I didn't mean it," said the Para. His whole face was shaking, trembling. He reached out his hands to us, begging. "I was only kidding—just a joke—aaaah!" The water bubbled round

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his chest, and he sank a thumb's breadth deeper into the sand. "You can't let me die like this," he shouted. "You can't . . ."

"You're a hero," said Léonie. "You told us. Heroes don't cry."

"I'm not," he whimpered. "I was lying. I'm not a Para. I'm not a hero. Don't let me die." He didn't know what he was saying any more. "The flics are after me. I smashed a window and stole some rings. Goddam lousy rings not worth a mille each. And the flics have been after me ever since. Everyone's against me. You can't let me die . . ." He was blubbering now, twisting himself deeper and deeper into the sand.

I saw something happening to Léonie's face. As if she was going to be sick. "Get him out," she said.

She turned away as I lay down on the hard sand and stretched forward over the skim of water towards the Para.

"Grip my hands," I said.

"I can't move," he sobbed. "I can't reach."

"Don't be a baby," I said. "You can't drown in that. We were playing a trick on you. It's not much more than a metre deep. You must be touching firm bottom now."

He let out his breath in a shuddering sigh, and closed his eyes. I could see he was exploring with his feet.

"Lie forward and relax," I said. "Go limp."

I got my fingers round his wrists, began to draw him towards me, digging my toes into the sand to give me purchase.

It wasn't very hard. He could have got himself out if he'd known how. The quicksand sucked and shuddered. Bubbles wallowed greasily up round his body, bursting in the moonlight like flowers opening. He lay almost on the surface now, his hands, his elbows, his shoulders on firm sand. At last he was out, climbing shakily to his knees, his chest heaving with great, shuddering gasps as the fear went out of him.

I turned away, not wanting to look at him any more than Léonie had. His soul was too naked. And as I turned he grabbed my wrist and twisted, yanking it behind my back and up, lifting me on to my toes with a streak of fire burning and darting in my shoulder.

"So it was a trick, was it?" he said. "No, don't try any more sand," he called to Léonie, "or I'll break his arm." He twisted his hand and I felt the tears come into my eyes with the pain.

Léonie let the sand she had snatched up dribble between her fingers. "Now come here." She looked at him uncertainly. "Come here!" He twisted more and I couldn't stop from crying out. She came a slow step towards us, looking from my face to his, her eyes frightened, her mouth trembling.

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" You can't," she said. " Not when we pulled you out . . ."

" I'm not a bloody kid," he said. " You can't . . . you can't," he mimicked her viciously. " Give me your arm, or I'll break his."

" Don't," I shouted. " Don't. Run for it. Get my father—"

His fist took me in the small of the back, and I arched like a hooked fish, the breath of my voice gone out of me with the agony.

" Now will you give me your arm? " he said. " I'll teach two kids to play tricks on a man like me. When I walk down the road in Marseilles even the flics get out of my way."

Very slowly Léonie held out her wrist towards him.

" No! " I screamed. " No! " Twisting until I thought my arm was broken. But still she held it out towards him, looking at me all the time. The strangest look.

" That's it," said the Para. " You're beginning to learn, eh? We'll have a nice time yet." He lifted his own free hand quite slowly to take her wrist, gloating over her submission.

And then it came. Like a hawk striking. Not a sound. Just a shadow. And then a crack like a stick snapping. The grip on my wrist slackened, vanished. And the Para was down on his knees, one arm hanging loose, broken, touching it with his other hand, and keening deep in his throat with the pain.

I looked up and there was Ti-tic, adjusting his crutch under his shoulder again. The crutch with which he had just broken the Para's arm.

Léonie and I backed away, side by side. I felt for her fingers, and they crept into mine.

" Don't be afraid," said Ti-tic. " We'll be going now. This trash isn't fit to mix with decent folk." He stirred the Para with the point of his crutch. " Get up, you poor rat."

The Para stood up, nursing his broken arm against his chest now, not looking at us. Against the great, slope-shouldered bulk of Ti-tic he looked small, nothing. A shrunken rat.

" Shall I tell them the truth about you? " said Ti-tic. The Para only shuddered, his back to us, his head bent. " That you're my son? " Ti-tic lifted his face up to the sky as if he was cursing it. " My only son."

He looked at us suddenly and harshly under his great, twisting black eyebrows. " A para! He was never a para. He attacked a girl in Arles. And went to gaol for it. And came out and attacked another. I said I'd hide him, take him through the marshes. Why? God knows why. Why does a man have a son? "

We stood trembling, barely understanding Ti-tic's words, the terrible pain of his eyes. The Para said nothing. Never even raised his head. And I turned away because it was horrible to see.

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" Go on. March," said Ti-tic. I heard a grunt as if he had pushed the Para with the point of his crutch.

Then at last the Para spoke, his voice broken and pleading, all the fear of hell in it. " You won't leave me? "

" No, you poor rat," said Ti-tic. " I won't leave you." They began to move up the path, the Para first, Ti-tic following, swinging on his great crutch like a gorilla. " Tell your mother we moved on," he said. Beside me Léonie was crying.

" It's all right now," I said. " They've gone." But she went on crying; and not knowing what else to do I put my arms round her, the way my father used to put his arms round me a long time ago. And suddenly it was very warm like that, and we fitted together like two hands clasped. Like the two wings of one bird, folded.

" Why are you crying? " I whispered.

" Because life is terrible," she said. " Not like the films."

" It could be like the films," I said. " I mean—you and me . . ."

I remembered the way her eyes had looked as she held out her wrist to the Para. Full of something strange. " Oh, Léonie," I whispered, " Oh, Léonie . . ."

Like two wings.

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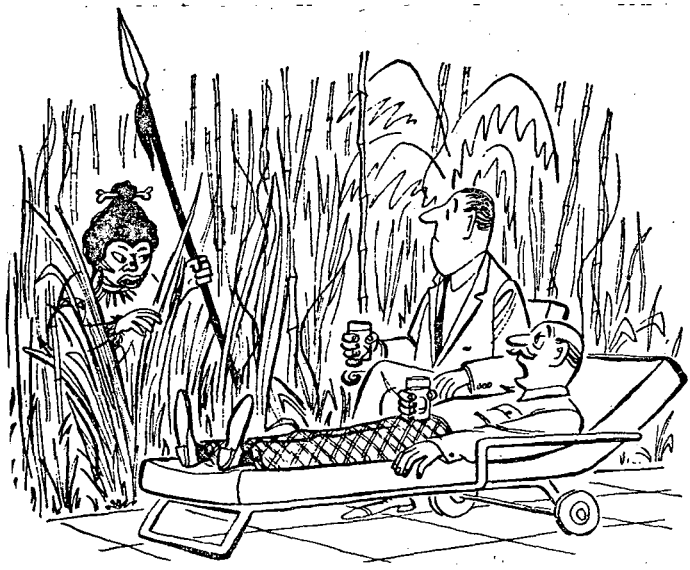

" I suppose I have been neglecting the garden."

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In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Othello*

Gondolier, Gondolier, my dear,
'Neath the twilight shade,
Let me hear, let me hear,
Thy tender serenade.
Gondolier, in thy little bark,
Yes, yes, I will sit by thee;
Tho' the night be dark,
Love hath power to see.
Thou shalt prove my Evening Star,
Brighter than yon skies;
Meet me then, my Gondolier,
'Neath the Bridge of Sighs.

Victorian Street Ballad

Romantic

When they embarked, early in the evening, to return to Venice, a sunset more marvellous than any they had seen in their lives spread suddenly over the world . . .

The gondola drifted out into the fire . . .

Then he gave an exclamation of wonder, for something happened which was so marvellous that it enabled him to *see* no less than she. For the past few minutes the giant rage of colour had been melting away, scarlet and gold dying into rose, and purple

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into periwinkle blue. Suddenly rose and blue fused together, and the sea became a shine of parma violets, stretching as far as the eye could reach into a great mass of petals, packed and glistening in dew. There was violet above and below: they were floating upon violets, the oars hewing their way through the massed miraculous flowers. She had only time to cry to him, "Oh look! look!"—and then it was gone . . . He said slyly, now that she was at peace and might be teased, "I shan't be sorry, for one reason, to have you safe in England again."

"Why?"

"I have power over you there."

"Haven't you power here?"

"Venice bewitches you . . ."

PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON, *Catherine Carter*

Whole-hearted

I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice' streets to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling place.

ROBERT BROWNING, *In a Gondola*

Practical

Toni interrupted his reverie by demanding that he should share her pleasure in the sequence of superb poses, which their gondolier perforce had to repeat over and over again in the three movements of his oar. Giles cast an envious look over his shoulder. A fellow who could wear a sash twisted round his hips, and stand upright and remote with all the glory of Venice for background, had obvious advantages over a recumbent Englishman without a sash!

"Would you love me better if I were a gondolier, Toni?"

"No: I'm not romantic."

"You lie," said Giles.

"Not for gondoliers, anyway."

"Nor for me. I know that. But for somebody? once? long ago? some day?"

"Well . . . but meanwhile—I'm here." She slipped down the cushions, closer to his side.

G. B. STERN, *A Deputy Was King*

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Ice-cold in Venice

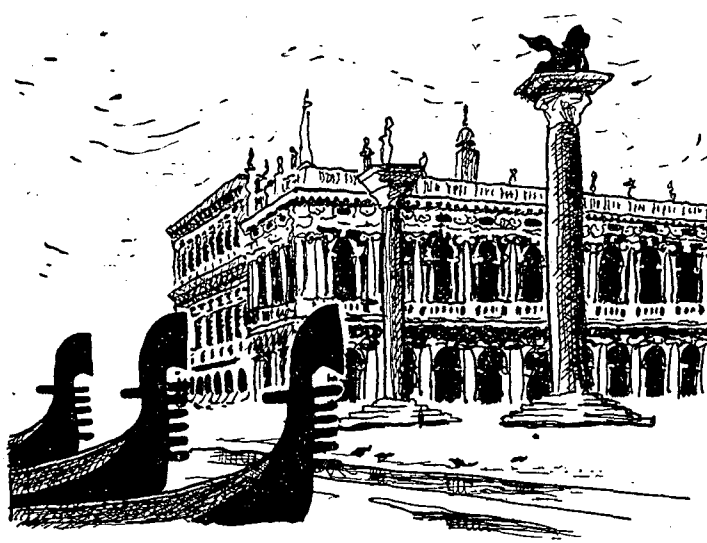
Most people think that the sun keeps shining over Italy and over Venice. I used to believe so myself. Unfortunately, the sun knows nothing of this . . . But the people of Venice declare, " This a wonderfully warm, semi-tropical city," and they build marble floors in their houses and do not give a thought to stoves or central heating. A few years ago when I visited the Arctic Circle I nearly fainted under the blazing sun (true, it happened to be the greatest heatwave for seventy-six years) but I almost caught pneumonia in one of the best hotels in Venice. With chattering teeth I dreamt of those admirable boarding houses in Bayswater and Pimlico where you drop a shilling in a slot every two or three minutes and light a gas-fire. There are no gas-fires in Venice; in that city of permanent sunshine and Adriatic lustre you can freeze like sparrows on the Siberian steppe.

GEORGE MIKES, *Italy for Beginners*

Canaletoff

The Dutchmen are their own best pals,
They're satisfied with their own canals,
So their galleries lack one major menace—
Those everlasting views of Venice.

OGDEN NASH



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DEADLINE

Such little things—
but they all began to add up

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

I SUPPOSE that everything was my fault, really, right from the very beginning. I don't mean the part that is now public knowledge—that society has found out and is making me pay for—but my just not suspecting . . . I swear I didn't know. I hadn't a clue until the moment I picked up that telephone receiver. And the other small detail that brought all my plans to ruin could have been avoided if I had bothered to find out—done three minutes' reading in the telephone directory. But that is the end of the story. Let's start at the beginning.

Jean and I had been married four years, and there were no children. We lived in a small house in one of those converted slum streets of Chelsea that are now fashionable and expensive, and which I could just afford as, apart from my novels, I had broken into the film-scripting business.

Our household was completed by Nanny, inherited from Jean's family when her mother died; she had been with them since before Jean was born, and was devoted to her. Spry, seventy-six, slightly absent-minded, and deaf only when she did not want to hear, she still addressed my wife as Miss Jean, and me, after a period of qualification, as Mr. Harry.

The only cloud that darkened her approval was the absence of children; a deplorable state of affairs that, she hinted obliquely at intervals, was entirely my fault.

I suppose it was inevitable that we should be thrown together with Colin Armitage, the artist who lived on his own next door. Jean and I found that we talked the same kind of language as he did. Colin was gifted, witty, generous, and a hundred things more that I would have liked to be. There was not much we could offer in return, except the company that a lonely man can crave, the filling of those blank hours after he had finished his work.

The friendship started when he began dropping in pretty regularly for a drink in the evening; but always, about once a week,

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a bottle would appear on the sideboard with a message that it was one for the house.

Those messages always amused me. They were not from Colin himself, who would have just slipped it in quietly, but from Nanny, who had taken delivery. And Nanny knew how to take a proper message, for she had been trained through the years by Jean's father who was a country doctor. Even now she kept to his approved form . . . Time: Patient: Message. It always made us laugh when we found the scraps of paper under the bottles. "6.15. Armitage. One Bott: Whisky."

I think you will find that any chain of events stems from one small thing: a sentence, a look. It is like the small bubble of the spring that leads inevitably, relentlessly, to the broad mouth of the river.

It started in this instance one evening in April when the three of us were having coffee after dinner. Jean had been looking happy, excited, all through the meal, and I knew that something had happened that couldn't be kept in for long. Suddenly she leaned forward and said, "Darling . . . I'm so thrilled. Colin says he wants to paint my portrait. Is that all right with you?"

I put down my cup. "Of course . . . I feel very honoured in the reflected glory. At least, I shall—if I can understand the result. But not if it's one of those jobs that Nanny says looks as if he has been riding a bicycle over the canvas." I never could begin to fathom his abstract work.

Colin laughed. "No. I promise you, old man, it will be a hundred per cent facsimile. When can I start, Jean?"

"Whenever you like, now we have the master's permission." There was a pause, and then she turned to me again. "By the way, what have we decided to do for a holiday this summer?"

I said, "I can't plan yet, my sweet. It looks as if this script will drag on and on, and I'll have to stick close in case of revision —and to get paid. You know what they are."

"I do. It was only that Colin was telling me he's taken a cottage at Newton Bromley in south Devon, and he says there's a twin to it next door. If we took that, you could at least get down for long weekends, even if the script isn't finished. And there's a chance you will be there all the time."

We took the cottage; but I wasn't there, even for long weekends, to start with.

The reason was an absurd panic in the studio. They were shooting then, and the trouble blew up because of the bald patch on the back of the leading man's head. After the whole of the love sequence had been shot, the director decided it looked ridiculous from any angle. He and the producer had a flaming

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row, and I was ordered to rewrite the whole script—a task so complex that it meant I had to put in a six-day week until they were satisfied.

At the time that we should have gone to Devon, the weather was lovely, and Jean seemed so disappointed at having to stay in town that, as usual, I gave in, and sent her off with Nanny as chaperone, happy in the knowledge that Colin was their near neighbour. I went to live in a pub until my chore was finished.

My troubles with the script resolved themselves rather more quickly than I had dared to expect, and since there still remained three weeks of our tenancy when my cheque came through, I packed my bags, and made for Paddington station.

I don't know if you have ever been to Newton Bromley. It's one of those tiny villages perched on an estuary of the south coast; wooded, sheltered, twisting in and out on the contours of the inlet. The cottages, ours and Colin's, were almost on the beach, with just the road between us and the sea; semi-detached, with a common roof, and only a long sail-loft separating them; no garden behind, just the thickets of rhododendron crowding down so that they almost covered the eaves.

I don't remember much of those first golden days, except that both Colin and Jean were so brown, so gay, and seemed to be so glad to see me. Only Nanny seemed a little distrait, a little silent, more forgetful, and more deliberately deaf than ever. I tried to catch up on their sunburn too quickly, made myself look like a broiled lobster, and retired hurt to the shade of the living-room to work on an overdue novel.

Perhaps I am very obtuse in some things, but it was several days before I began to realise just exactly what the situation was; the realisation came slowly—the continual trickle of a slow poison that builds up to a fatal dose. There was the way they looked at each other when they did not think I was watching; the way they had taken to walking side by side in front of me when the three of us were on the narrow path down to the pub for our evening pint; the constrained tension among the locals when we got there; a chance remark, half heard, as I opened the door of the village shop one afternoon; the times I saw them touch hands. So many things... Such little things. But they all began to add up.

I couldn't believe the truth: I didn't want to believe it. And Nanny, however hard I fished, would say nothing. She merely became a little more vague and went back to her kitchen to bash at the pots and pans.

So I said nothing. Not even about the portrait that I was never

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allowed to see, that always remained shrouded when I was in Colin's cottage. It was to be a surprise, they explained, and I mustn't see it until it was finished. A surprise, a present for me; that was why I was not allowed at any of the sittings.

Then, early one Saturday morning, the telegram came.

It was from Jean's father, or from his housekeeper, rather. He had had a slight stroke, not really serious, but she should come at once.

I was all concern. I offered to drive her there, but she said, "No, darling. You've just started your holiday; after all that slaving, too. I can manage by train. I won't be more than a few days. And I'll phone you."

Even with Nanny around, it seemed awfully lonely at the cottage when I came back from seeing Jean off at Exeter. I mooched about, tried to write a couple of pages, and then went round the back of the cottages to see what Colin was doing.

I remember that the door was shut, which was unusual. I knocked, and there was quite a pause before his voice asked sharply, "Who is it?"

"Harry."

"Just a moment." When he opened the door and stood to one side in his paint-covered smock to let me pass, I noticed the sheet in its usual position over the picture.

"Nearly finished?"

"Almost. It will be ready for you by the time Jean gets back."

I didn't ask him how he knew Jean had gone away: enough to know that she was safely on her way to Essex. I said, "You'll come in and have a bite to eat tonight, old man? I hate being alone."

He gave me a long, searching look. "If I can come lateish, Harry. I want all the light I can get to finish this."

"About eight, then?"

"O.K."

I went back to our own cottage and tried to write a little more.

When Nanny brought in my lunch on a tray, I told her that Colin was coming to supper.

"Him?" she sniffed—and there was a world of expression in the word. "Him? Well, if you say so."

"What's wrong with him?" I swung round in my chair to face her. But she had disappeared out of the door, and soon I heard the crash of saucepans . . .

It must have been about three o'clock, and I was in the middle of a rather tricky paragraph, when the telephone on the desk, close to my elbow, rang once. Just a faint tinkle. I suppose that

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should have warned me, but automatically I picked up the receiver, only half listening as I tried to think of the sentence I was writing.

"Hullo, Newton 427?" It was Colin's voice. We were sharing a party line.

I was replacing the receiver when I heard the voice of his caller . . . Jean's voice . . . so eager, so excited. I sat there frozen, listening.

She said, "I've booked a suite with bathroom at the Royal Palace, darling. I'll wait here for you. What train are you catching?"

"The six o'clock. I can't make the five-twenty. I've got to finish this damned thing."

"But why, darling? Why not leave it as it is?"

He laughed. "No, I promised myself I would finish it. For poor Harry. A sort of good-bye and thank you present. It will help to salve my conscience."

"All right. But hurry as fast as you can, my darling. I'm waiting for you; so longing, so ready."

I waited for the click of his receiver before I put back my own, and then I sat quite still looking out of the window at the sunlit water, not seeing it—with murder in my heart.

I sat there thinking as hard as if I had been working out the plot for a novel. It took me three-quarters of an hour.

First, I looked at my watch and the electric clock on the mantelpiece: they synchronised exactly, three-forty-five. Then I went over and moved the hands of the clock back exactly a quarter of an hour to three-thirty. I made sure that the message-pad and pencil were handy by the telephone; then looked at my feet—plimsoled, rubber-shod, quiet. Softly, I tried my imitation of Colin's voice. To me it sounded all right, though it would be even better through a handkerchief.

Then I opened the door and shouted for Nanny. "I'm going out in the car for a breath of air," I said loudly. "There may be a phone call from Jean, or my agent. Don't forget them for two days, like you did the last time. Write them down."

She glared at me. "I didn't forget. And I know how to take a message properly. When I did it for the doctor, I used—"

"I know, Nanny. I just thought I'd mention it."

"You need not have, Mr. Harry." She glanced at the electric clock. "My, I thought it was later than that! Do you mind if I sit in here for a minute and rest my feet and look at the papers?"

"No, of course not."

I went out through the kitchen, collecting two corks from empty vermouth bottles on my way. I got the car and drove off

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down the road away from the two cottages, then cut back up the track that led on to the brow of the hill above the rhododendrons.

It was the work of a few minutes to open the tool box, put on the gloves I kept there for dirty work, fill the spare length of radiator hose-pipe with heavy, sandy earth, plug both ends with the corks, and creep down through the rustling, secret shadows towards Colin's back door.

It was open. Through the doorway I could see him crouching, absorbed, as he put the finishing touches to his masterpiece. But it was not at his back, at that vital spot behind the ear, that I stared in the second I hung on the threshold. It was at the picture itself, the first time I had seen it unveiled. Jean, naked, lying on a couch. Beautifully portrayed, too well done.

I thought of the last words I had heard her speak. So longing, so ready.

He had no time to realise what was happening. I was across the room in two strides and had hit him before he started to turn his head. He just gave a grunt and fell against the canvas, then rolled on his back, his face smeared with the wet paint.

I looked at my watch as I let the cosh fall to the floor; just four. The clock at home, the only one there, would be showing three-forty-five. Here, another must show something different.

I disliked having to turn over the still-warm wrist, to stoop and alter the hands of the watch to five o'clock: and then to smash the glass to stop the mechanism. But I had to. So that he would be presumed to have died at that time.

"Ring home," I said to myself. "Ring your own number, 425. Pretend you are Colin. Nanny will write down three-fifty. Four minutes to get home, and don't let her out of your sight for the rest of the evening. When she's not looking, move the hands of the clock on to the right time—and with all the motive in the world you could not have done it. You were sitting with her at five o'clock, when Colin was murdered."

I picked up the telephone receiver and dialled the numbers: 4—2—5. For a moment I thought of Jean, waiting in her lonely room. Let her sweat . . .

I came back to reality to hear the repeated single beat of "number engaged." Who could be on our line? Jean, perhaps, with her covering lies. She wouldn't be long, for I knew Nanny had no truck with extended telephone calls. Time was running against me, but there was still a good margin. I hung up, and waited.

It was very quiet and rather warm in Colin's studio. I tried not to look at the picture while I waited, nor at the untidy bundle

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on the floor in front of it. I gave the caller all of three minutes, and then dialled again. Still the line was engaged.

The clock at home would be showing three-fifty-five now. Cold fear began to creep into my mind. I panicked—and dialled the operator.

"This is Newton 427. I'm trying to get Newton 425, but it always seems to be engaged. Will you test the line?"

A pause, and then the operator's voice replying patiently, "Did you dial it, sir? They are on a party line, those two numbers, so you can't use the automatic system. It has to go through the exchange. Shall I ring them for you?"

The exchange! Fear increased as my mind raced over the possibilities. This was not the impersonal, untimed routine of another call on a meter. A human brain had become involved; a docket had to be made out; timed for all I knew—and with the right time, the exchange time.

"No, please cancel it."

There was one last chance: the callbox down by the Post Office. I hurtled through the undergrowth, turned the car, stowed the gloves in the tool-box, and roared down towards the red kiosk that was my haven. The time at home would be four-ten: I had only a slender margin.

This time I got through at once. I performed my imitation, and Nanny replied suitably...

When I had parked the car in the garage, I strolled casually into the cottage and asked, "Did Jean ring, Nanny?"

"No. But that Mr. Armitage did." She sniffed. "You will be eating alone tonight; he says he can't come." She glared at me. "I've written it all down on the pad, with the time, like you told me."

When she had gone, I looked at the form. It was all safe in her angular handwriting. 4.15. *Armitage. Can't eat.*

I altered the hands of the clock to the right time, then called her in again, "Nanny, that TV cowboy thing you like is on now. Come and watch it." She stayed with me, except for odd moments when she had to make the coffee. After that we watched together until we went to bed.

The police came at nine o'clock the next morning, and I think she was far more worried about their visit than I. They were careful, considerate, but not over-friendly.

"Mr. Hughes—" it was the Inspector talking—"I understand that Mr. Armitage phoned you just before you got in from your drive?"

"Yes. Nanny, here, took the message. I can't think why he bothered to ring, when he need have walked only a few yards."

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" Perhaps he was busy, sir. Finishing a painting, perhaps."

" I haven't seen it yet. It's of my wife, you know. I'm told it is very good."

" It is, sir." The voice was expressionless.

I pushed the message-pad towards him. " There you are: Nanny made a note."

He didn't even bother to glance at it. Instead, he looked at Nanny, and asked, " You recognised the voice, of course? "

" Him? " Nanny looked at the ceiling. " I know it was him: that la-di-dah," she added scornfully.

I said, " I don't quite follow—" or started to, but the Inspector cut in very quickly.

" We don't take much notice of gossip, Mr. Hughes, although they tell me that your wife was—very friendly with the deceased. May I ask where she is now? "

" In Essex, looking after her father."

He did not seem to have heard me. He stared at me as he said, " Fact is all we are after, Mr. Hughes. Fact, not talk. The lady here has said you were with her—"

" Yes." Nanny's voice was fierce. " And then we watched that cowboy thing on television, and the rest of the children's programme, then the news—"

The Inspector cut her short. " I'm sure you did. But what about the earlier telephone call to this number? "

I looked at him in a numb, dull way. " I don't understand."

" You do, Mr. Hughes; you do. Someone tried to phone here from the other half of the party line. They hadn't read the instructions in the directory, didn't know it was impossible to dial direct, that it has to go through the exchange. When they did find out, they cancelled the call.

" That someone was *you*, Mr. Hughes; in your fright you used your own voice, and the operator recognised it. But even if you had not made that mistake, there was another thing; one you could not possibly know. Only cancelled calls are *timed* on the ticket at the exchange. . . and this one was at four-fifteen. They say you spoke to them from Newton 427, Mr. Armitage's cottage. You say you were home by then . . .

" Where *were* you, in fact, Mr. Hughes? "

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★ ★ ★

UNDETERRED GENT

I believe in getting into hot water: it keeps you clean.

G. K. CHESTERTON

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COLLECTOR'S ITEM

The notes were engraved as brilliantly as a peacock's tail

BY YOUNGMAN CARTER

YESTERDAY I sold my car for about four times as much as it cost brand new. This may sound like very good business, for I bought it secondhand at three years old—indeed, four, if you look in the road book carefully.

Yet, I'm afraid—no, I'm sure—that I'm a mug and that this is no sort of a bargain. The car is, or was, a Randolph sports, two-seater, 12 h.p., a reliable little job. Yesterday morning I was driving her round Regent's Park in London heading north to Swiss Cottage. No traffic about at that hour, eleven-thirtyish—only a few nurses and dogs and children playing around in the greenery. It was just the occasion to go slow and reflect how pleasant and rural London can be if you're in the mood.

It was all very lazy and civilised.

Quite suddenly I had one of those twinges which make people say someone is walking over your grave. In fact, it was more like being near an ultra-rapid flash bulb, the type which is so fast that you cannot actually see the light.

Then the car went dead on me completely. Dead as a doornail. I let her wander to the kerb and tried everything, but nothing responded. A broken connection somewhere vital, I supposed, not being an engineer by nature.

I got out with the forlorn intention of looking under the bonnet—a brave gesture in the face of fate so far as I'm concerned, for all the good I really expected to do.

Dear Providence, I thought, send me a friendly mechanic, and save me a half-mile walk to a garage.

The answer to prayer was swift, but rather odd. A young man, about twenty-two if that, walked from the bushes and stood beside me. He was wearing bright blue denims, and at first I decided he must be a film actor, he looked so clean and unreal. He had tight, curly, yellow hair and a suntan which even close to might have been make-up—more of a south-of-France type than London N.W.1. Then a couple of girls in white riding-breeches

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cantered past on chestnut horses among the trees, looking so glamorous that I felt sure there must be a camera team somewhere around.

" Well, by Zing and by Zing! " said the young man, addressing me. " That's a Randolph, isn't it? A 1954 Randolph, by Zing! "

He had a rather high-pitched voice, with a " refined " accent like a salesman in an expensive man's shop, but not altogether unpleasant. The only thing about him which was not slightly bogus was his obvious, adoring admiration for my car.

" A sports Randolph 1954," I admitted, and thought to myself, But as it has conked out there's nothing so particularly wonderful about that.

Aloud, I added—since I hoped he knew something about these things—" The ignition seems to have gone west."

He was still enthralled. It was as if someone had walked up to him with a picture under his arm, muttering, " Psst, chum; what price the Mona Lisa? " and produced the genuine article.

After a moment he said in a casual, afterthought tone, " Well, of course she won't run here—you're in a zone. But, by Zing, what a beauty she is! "

He touched a wing almost reverently and then leaned across the driving-seat to look at the panel. " Gears," he said. " Speeds marked up to a hundred! Incredible! " Turning directly to me, he began to eye me with rather the same admiration. " And you're pretty good yourself—very well done. Going to a rally? "

At this point it dawned on me that I was not exactly on his wavelength, even if I felt vaguely flattered by his unconcealed and wide-eyed admiration. Privately I was rather glad that I'd polished the old brute that morning, that I had my new suit on, and that my camel's-hair coat lay in the back of the car, looking pretty sporting.

Then he put his hand into a pocket, pulled out a small, transparent box, and said, " Here, have some joy." He flicked it open, took out a pill like an acid drop or sweet capsule, swallowed it, and offered one to me.

Now this, I think, was my undoing. He was so friendly, so easy to look at in his young filmstar way, so openly delighted and anxious to be friends, that I took one and put it in my mouth.

It was delicious. All at once I felt as if I'd had a haircut, a massage, a Turkish bath, and half a bottle of champagne. I was on top of the world. The sun came out and the birds began to sing.

Another young man appeared behind him, equally smartly dressed. There must be a brand-new garage somewhere near, I thought, or perhaps they are making a movie about garages?

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"Look, Leo," said my friend. "A Randolph—a 1954 Randolph. Isn't she beautiful?"

The new boy was taller, with the same suntan, but he was clearly a wider guy altogether, more sophisticated, more intelligent, though equally charming. He fingered my car as if it had been a piece of rare porcelain and he an expert in such things.

"It's atomic," he said at last. "Simply atomic. The most astounding little kettle I've seen in years. You collect them, I suppose? But this a real prize. Finest complete outfit this side of Pernambuco." Here, I saw, was another enthusiast.

By now I was so pleased with myself for my personal brilliance in owning this masterpiece, and so delighted with my companions, that I began to feel really magnanimous and expansive.

"If we can get her to go," I said, "I'll give you a run in her."

"Go? Of course she'll go," said my blond friend. "She bowled in here all right. I watched you arrive. Just push her out of the zone and you'll see. I can't think why you came this way and hoped to get through."

As I was clearly puzzled, he went on. "Look, you're in a zone, see? Stranger round these parts? Hunting, riding, recreation, sports, and so on—you know. The ray has cut you out, see? Just push her down the alley and she'll go."

He put his hands on the wing. Leo, the tall one, was obviously going to give a hand, too, when he paused and eyed me squarely.

"I suppose, since you're certainly in the ring on these things, that you wouldn't like to sell her? I collect a little myself."

"It depends," I said, with a magnificently casual shrug, "what you're prepared to pay." After all, I'm in business myself and not doing too well. Two-fifty there and then would have settled a lot of problems for me.

"Have some joy," said Leo, and passed a box round. We all had some joy.

"Four hundred quid," I said to myself, "not a penny less, and it'll be a bargain at that."

The two young men eyed each other, squaring up for some special bidding. Four-fifty, if they're really keen, I calculated, and the birds were singing fit to burst my eardrums.

Leo took out a notecase and said very deliberately, "I'll give you here and now, two thousand five hundred. Old Lucas, the glory man—" he indicated his rival—"might offer more. But I said it first, and I promise she'll go to a good home. I'd love her like my firstborn, and look after her as if she was a Queen Commissar. What do you say?"

He thrust some notes at me, and they stuck in my hand. I find it difficult to tell you how glorious it all was. The two sporting

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rivals, my new, dear, lifelong friends, the heavenly day, the warm sun, the laughing girls on their horses, and my super glamour car, the Randolph sports 12—everything combined to make life as gay and colourful as the last act of a good musical.

There I stood, probably openmouthed, but with the notes clutched in my hand, uncounted. This deal was far too good to miss—could only happen once in a lifetime.

I temporised, just a little, with my conscience. I'd give them half a chance at second thoughts, since I knew now what a superman I was at this moment. "Just try her out," I began, "and the Road Fund—the licence book—the policy thing . . ."

By now they had their hands on the car, moving her quickly round so that she pointed downhill, but they paused in sudden and delighted astonishment. "By Zing!" said Leo. "All that, too? Zip them on to me—my number is the easiest thing you ever recorded. Zero zero one seven four on the Great Belt—"

They pushed her down the slope, and I stood there with the things in my hand until I heard the engine start. Nothing wrong with my old Randolph, that glorious, streamlined masterpiece.

Then they rounded the corner and I was quite alone. Twenty yards away there was a public seat by the verge, and I turned towards it with the ease of a man in seven-league boots. If I wanted to, I thought, I could jump there.

But I didn't. I took one step, then another, and suddenly I had that someone-on-my-grave feeling again. My teeth chattered, and a nasty, whipping little gust nearly took the notes out of my hand. It was a treacherous day and might be going to rain.

And here was I in Regent's Park, without a car, without a coat, and late for an appointment. Somehow I knew in my bones that this vanishing trick was permanent.

But I have the notes. £2,500 in notes. They are remarkable works of art in themselves, printed on a sort of transparent paper, and engraved as brilliantly as a peacock's tail.

We, the Governors of the United World Banks of Great Britain and the United States promise to pay the Bearer on Demand . . .
Signed, W. Frost and E. Patmos. July 2059

I am leaving them to my grandchildren. What else can I do?

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Youngman Carter, until recently editor of The Tatler, is also a portrait artist. Married to Margery Allingham. Lives in a William-and-Mary house with a large studio in the wilds of Essex.

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SWORDS & CHAMPAGNE

A royal ball—a scented night of early summer—officers in blue and gold on the dance floor—and Magda, the most lovely motive for dishonourable conduct

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***In next month's* ARGOSY**

ON SALE APRIL 10

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BY DAVID WALKER

"MARCUS FINIGAN! Where are you speaking from?" Finigan closed one ear against the bedlam of Timbala Post Office, and listened with the other to the Maharaja of Timbala. "Heard you were coming to rid us of this wretched tiger . . . Yes, delighted to help . . . A drink this evening? . . . Splendid, then."

Finigan hung up, wiped brow with red bandanna, left the noisy furnace of the Post Office, drank another mug of tepid tea, and drove five miles to a forest rest-house. The temperature was a hundred and ten, and the monsoon was still a fortnight away. Heat did not bother Marcus Finigan. Nor did the state of his finances bother him. You know, he thought with that complacency which endeared him to a few people, but not to many, I'm at my best when I'm at my brokest. . .

The sunset climbed the hills. Night arrived as Finigan climbed the long avenue. He drove up to the palace at a respectable speed in his respectable suit, parked the jeep, dusted himself, and was led through tarnished halls.

Finigan paused a moment at a door. Then he made an exit from the building, and an entry to the party.

Three women, five men—strangers, except Sharma and the

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Maharaja. Of the women—and Finigan's trained eye always embraced the ladies—of the women, one would be Mrs. Sharma, one would be a tea planter's weatherbeaten wife, the third . . .

His trained eye questioned number three. There was a lull in the talk, and heads turned to him. So this is the famous Finigan, they would be thinking. Finigan enjoyed the inevitable stir as he prowled down steps and on to a terraced lawn.

His host came to meet him. The Maharaja wore a thin, black dinner-jacket of admirable cut. He was a man as large as Finigan himself. He limped, and on the third finger of his left hand, holding an ebony-and-silver cane, was the Emerald of Timbala.

"My dear fellow," he said, shaking hands, "this is indeed a pleasure, and after so many years . . ."

Finigan had once shot tigers with, and once played polo against, Tim Timbala—both respectable occasions, he was glad to remember. "A long time, Your Highness," Finigan said, "'but still the niffy Liffey flows . . .'"

"'Through Dublin's trials and Dublin's woes.'" Timbala laughed. It was fantastic, his knowing that obscure Irish jingle; Timbala was a fantastic man. "You look very fit," he said.

Timbala was lame, but as hard and lean as a boy of half his age, of twenty or so. This, in India, was most unusual.

Finigan's glance wandered to the hand that held the cane—that emerald, one splendid oriental gleam setting off austerity—and up

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again to the smiling face, paler than Finigan's own, but the eyes were black in artificial light. " You look well yourself," he said.

" Tolerably," said Timbala, " except for this sciatica, which has plagued me since last monsoon. My father used to take the cure at Baden-Baden. But in these days, as you will understand . . ."

Finigan understood very well what the Maharaja left unsaid. In these days Indian Princes did not gravitate with suites to Baden-Baden. In these days they were pensioners on sufferance.

" There is potable champagne. Or whisky? "

" I have a vast whisky thirst," said Finigan. He did not say that his thirst was all the vaster because he could ill afford whisky of his own. Free drink beckoned.

" Then your thirst shall be suitably quenched. Now come along, old boy, and meet everyone."

Finigan met everyone—the first tea planter and his weather-beaten wife; a second planter with an expensive face; then Mrs. Sharma, to whom he bowed, making the graceful Hindu greeting palm to palm; then Duncan Dawson, planter number three.

" How d'you do," said Dawson; and he added, " glad you've come." Then he met Mrs. Dawson, the one whom his trained eye had instantly observed. He admired her now, and Mrs. Dawson smiled.

" Marcus, you villain," said Unni Sharma, the Commissioner. He was a plump and jolly little man, the last man you would take for a trouble-shooter of renown. But that was why Sharma had been posted to Timbala.

The Maharaja—His Highness Maharajrana Sher Bahadur of Timbala, ex-seventeen-guns—sat with his guests. Mrs. Dawson, Finigan, and Sharma made a smaller group. Timbala was an admirable host. He drew people out urbanely. Quite a come-down, Finigan thought, meaning that the company tonight must make dim comparison with the crowned heads, the Viceroys of the past. But there was no evidence of that in Timbala's courtly air, talking to the weatherbeaten wife. Her face was animated, and Finigan, who studied faces, caught a faded glimpse of the bride's face of twenty years or so ago.

I wonder why he never married? Finigan thought. Timbala—Tim to the élite of three continents—had played gay and fast at his state's expense across those continents. Then Finigan thought it as much to the point to wonder why he himself had never married. Well, that's easy, Finigan thought.

" You seem pensive, Mr. Finigan," said Mrs. Dawson.

" I am," he said. " I'm thinking: I would not love you dears so much, lov'd I not freedom more."

She and Sharma laughed, but Finigan remained grave. He downed the large beaker of whisky-and-soda, his first today. Finigan felt good, and now he felt better. What *was* it about the Dawsons?

" Shooting man-eaters—" said Mrs. Dawson. Her voice was English, with another quality or timbre behind it—just as Timbala's

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voice was English with a difference, a musical rotundity—"is that your job?"

"Yes," he said. "But it's an unhealthy occupation, so the rewards have to be very healthy, don't they, Unni?"

"I'll do my best," said Sharma. "But you must remember, Marcus—there is competition here about rewards."

The three of them were quiet. They looked over a stone balustrade that marked the limit of this terrace, and guarded the brink of a precipice.

Far out and down, and dotted from east to south to west, were lights—the sizeable pattern of Timbala Town, the flickering clusters that were villages, the bright lights of the tea-gardens. But lights were few against the black panorama of the forest. And there were sounds—drums beating, cracked voices in falsetto, a pumping engine somewhere. Near at hand, the brain-fever bird was calling, Brain-fever, brain-fever! Up and up, and stop and start again. There was a whiff of forest fires, a tang of dust. It was still very hot at a quarter past seven, but the hardest edge was off the heat.

Finigan looked over his shoulder at Timbala Palace, lit from the terrace, a rococo monstrosity of Hindu architecture. The colour was baby pink, prettily awful in this light.

Marcus Finigan, Irishman, considered the small company again—one Hindu prince; two Brahmins; two Glaswegians, he would guess; one Yorkshireman; Dawson, whose voice was unmarked English; and Mrs. Dawson, probably American—a not unusual hotchpotch.

For three reasons these people were under strain. First, the hot weather was at its peak. Second, the man-eating tiger of Timbala had killed its hundred-and-forty-third victim five days ago. Of these two reasons, one could be endured; the other could be guarded against by the privileged, such as were here tonight.

The third reason was that Sharma's immediate predecessor, and one Congress member of the Delhi legislature, and one English tea planter and his wife, and the night watchman at their bungalow, and one Anglo-Indian Inspector of Police—that the throats of these six people had been cut in recent months within a ten-mile radius of Timbala. The Maharaja's guests tonight would represent, say, half the upper echelon of the district.

Finigan's glass was full again. He drank slowly this time, watching. They were people long inured to stress—the stresses of climate, isolation, explosive labour troubles. Their faces were in strict control, except the face of the Yorkshireman, who had drunk too much, and he laughed wildly, strains released—and the other faces turned swiftly, guardedly to his, and turned away. Even Mrs. Dawson, so beautiful and so serene, even her eyes moved a shade too quickly.

Only the Maharaja's calm seemed altogether genuine. He drank champagne, but sparingly. He shifted people round, and sat with Mrs. Dawson now. He had put the weatherbeaten wife

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at ease, speaking her language with her. But he and Mrs. Dawson spoke quite another language—a language of nuance, of things half said—the cut and parry of a cosmopolitan, cultivated world.

Then Finigan remembered. The Ambassador's daughter, that was it. She had been to Darjeeling for the weekend, met a planter, ex-Army officer, married him on Monday, and her widowed father was without a hostess. Love complete and ruthless at first sight, but the cynical Indian world said, "Wait till spoilt Miss Diplomat has sweated the hot weather out."

The world had been wrong, for Mr. and Mrs. Dawson were a contented couple after ten years or so, if Marcus Finigan knew anything, and he knew a lot.

"Would you play for us, Your Highness?" she was asking.

The Maharaja hesitated. He was so calm, so sure, that any indecision seemed out of character. This might be well-mannered diffidence. There was a chorus of, "Please do's."

"Play ush soom of that highbrow stuff to chase away the blues," said the Yorkshireman too loudly on the bright terrace—secure, small world above the darkness.

"I fear I play nothing but highbrow stuff, Mr. Pickering," the Maharaja said urbanely, and Mr. Pickering subsided. Timbala bowed his consent to Mrs. Dawson. "Shall I lead the way?" he asked.

They went inside, and through the ornate decrepitude of public rooms no longer used. Finigan watched the Maharaja limp ahead. "You're at Kalapani, aren't you?" he said to Duncan Dawson.

"That's us. Why not stop for dinner on your way?"

"I'd like to," Finigan said. The invitation was just what he had hoped for, and had not had to angle for.

"This is my private corner," said Timbala, opening a door for them. There were few servants in evidence about the palace.

The air-conditioning felt like paradise. Why not have his party here? thought Finigan. Well, he had moved his party here.

"I do not much like it," said the Maharaja about air-conditioning. "But my pet things like it very much."

This room was in astonishing contrast to the musty, over-decorated, lofty jumble through which they had come. That was the decaying relic of an office; this, the man.

Finigan had known Timbala slightly once. He had heard that he played the piano well. He had heard that, even in his wild days, he was a patron of the arts as well as of the ladies. But Finigan had expected a conglomeration: the priceless perfection, the priceless enormity, at least one grotesque elephant's-foot table with an ivory palace on it, too much richness everywhere.

Instead, he saw the treasures of a catholic taste: Chinese, Indian, and Persian, English, French. Timbala in his days of splendour could have hired a decorator to provide him with a period masterpiece. But this mixed economy of beauty could

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have come only from himself. It was unique in Finigan's Indian experience. Finigan sat with Sharma on a sofa, brocade cool beneath him, and that coolness was an active pleasure in itself.

"First a Chopin étude," said the Maharaja. It was a light and limpid piece, Chopin inconsequential.

"Marcus, we should meet," murmured Unni Sharma.

"Say when and where." Appointment made. The étude finished.

Now something else, and this was very different, a thing of pomp and circumstance. How well did he play? He played brilliantly, but how well in the highest terms? Finigan did not know enough to know. The chords of splendour ended. Now adagio, sombre in the lower register. Sorrow and resignation, was it, in a brief second movement? And now another tune, a rising melody. An urgent something grew and grew, and drowned the melody; and still it grew to fury, to a wild stampede of music.

The Maharaja rested. His mouth was working. Then he stood, and turned, and bowed to his audience of eight. He had been asked to play, and he had played; the finality of that bow did not permit requests for encores. The Maharaja wiped his brow.

"Your own, Your Highness?" asked Mrs. Dawson.

"Yes," he said. "My own, and my first semi-public performance."

"I would love to learn it."

Timbala looked at her a moment. "You shall," he said. "You shall! I'll let you have the score." He smiled. He had a particularly vivid, charming smile.

"What are the pitchers?" asked Mr. Pickering. He looked at the paintings somewhat owlishly, with some distaste. Mr. Pickering had been given small ones, but Mr. Pickering had done himself too well too early.

"That's a Gauguin," said Timbala as enthusiastically as if Mr. Pickering were a sober connoisseur of Post-Impressionism. "Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse . . ." He spoke about each.

"And the empty frame—that was my chef d'œuvre, early Picasso, before the great Picasso muddled my intellect—and even his own, who knows? I sold it last year to one of your countrymen, Mrs. Dawson. Dollars are so desirable, both to Pandit Nehru's government and to me. But I said to him—he was a delightful fellow—I said, 'I sell you the painting, but not the frame. I shall keep it there, where it has hung since 1938. But the frame will not be empty. I shall see my peasant woman dressed in blue, with the blue sea and the sky behind, my blue woman with her brown-clad boy.'"

The Maharaja laughed. "Such sentimentality," he said. "Such a mad idea, but it works, you know. I really do still have her. We bachelors are odd fellows, eh, Mr. Finigan, cherishing our memories of canvas ladies?"

"It's a lone, sad life, Your Highness," said Marcus Finigan as

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lightly. But he saw pathos. He did not really find it odd that a man could cherish a painting by memory. What was surprising was the power of such a man's imagination. How come he knows I'm a bachelor? thought Finigan.

Timbala was speaking now again. "Marcus Finigan and I have business. I'm going to help him about the man-eater in any small way that remains within my power. So perhaps you will forgive us? Thank you so much for brightening my evening. I live such a pedestrian life nowadays, you know." He shook hands with them all, and opened the door, where servants waited.

The Maharaja sighed. "Well, that's that," he said. "Party over. Always a relief, don't you think, old boy, however charming the guests may be? I trust poor Mr. Pickering can homeward plod his boozy way in safety down my hill."

Finigan laughed at this surprising man, nearer the man that he remembered. Timbala had been a small state, but a very rich one. It had had to be, to support Timbala. It had been swallowed, after Independence, into West Bengal. Timbala had been left with his palace, with some jungle tracts, with a pittance, and with his personal possessions. The rumour was that he had been very bitter. But he did not seem bitter now. He seemed philosophical, even about selling Picasso minus frame.

"I congratulate you on this room," said Finigan. He wanted help from Timbala, so it could have been blarney, but was not. Finigan admired beauty in any form. He saw that emerald again, square-cut, deep green, on the long finger on the cane. He wondered if it really could be flawless, as the story had it.

"My pet things," Timbala said. "And one by one they go. I and my dwindling possessions—such effete anachronisms in this bustling age."

"What use is an age without anachronisms?"

The Maharaja did not comment on Finigan's profound remark. "A drink?" he said. "Are you sure? Come to the gun-room, then. Tell me," he said en route, "do you think the tiger is still in this area?"

The man-eater of Timbala was so named because its first kill—and many others, and the most recent—had been in this district. Timbala was the centre of operations; but the tiger worked an area a hundred miles long and some twenty wide, below and into the beginnings of the Himalaya.

"It seems likely," Finigan said. "Forest fires to east and west— Yes, I would put my money on it. But that still leaves a sizeable area, perhaps just small enough for me to get the news and get there in a hurry." He meant for him to sit over a fresh victim's body, which was the only hope worth speaking of.

The Maharaja shivered. "It's a nauseating business, isn't it?" he said. "I sat up for that devil several times, you know, until my wretched sciatica reduced mobility, and made discretion seem the better part. I wonder if you're right, though, about its still being

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here. Those forest fires are intermittent. The heat may be greater at Timbala." He smiled at his little quip, and opened the gun-room door.

The cabinets were glass-fronted. Finigan stared. He had never seen such an armoury—two sets of three matched Purdeys; twelves; sixteens; twenties; automatics; every kind of shotgun; rifles, singles, doubles, of a dozen calibres from .22 up to a mammoth .600 double; pistols and revolvers in a smaller cabinet; one wall stacked with kukris, knives, curved swords, straight swords, every kind of bladed weapon.

"Golly!" said Finigan. He said it with respect, because Timbala was no fancy ironmongery collector. He had been the best duck-shot in India by repute, and as for tigers . . .

Finigan had no pretensions with a shotgun. But with a certain double-barrelled rifle, now resting in the jeep, he would match himself against any man alive. Finigan had no false modesty. He had confidence in himself, an abundance of it, as was necessary.

"A nice collection, isn't it? The absurd thing is that I have lost my taste for killing birds and animals. It bores me, nowadays. A dreadful confession," said the Maharaja gleefully, "but I would much rather play my piano sonata than shoot a tiger."

"Me, too," said Finigan, not that he could do more than strum on the piano, and not that he agreed entirely, because he was still a wild Irishman, and always would be. But he shot tigers for business only now, and with pleasure only in the pitting of his brains and in the crisis moment.

"Dani, my one remaining elephant, is staunch to tiger. Budloo, my old friend and head shikari, and now pensioner, knows every nook and cranny in these jungles. Both are entirely at your disposal."

Which was all that Finigan wanted, and the spontaneous offer made it even better. "Thank you, Your Highness."

"Budloo!" the Maharaja called to the other door.

It opened at once. The man dipped swiftly to touch his brow to the toe of the Maharaja's patent-leather shoe. Timbala looked down at him. His face was kindly. "Rise, old one," he said.

Budloo stood again. He saluted Finigan with both hands. "Figgan Sahib Bahadur," he said. Brave Finigan Master.

"Budloo does not bestow Bahadurs on all and sundry," said Timbala, which pleased Finigan, who dearly loved his due.

The Maharaja talked, and Budloo talked, and Finigan talked. He took a liking to Budloo, who showed sharpness and vigour beyond his years. He sided firmly with Timbala, and against Finigan, as to the likely whereabouts of the tiger. Time would tell who was right.

"Tomorrow in the morning early," Finigan said, and Budloo, the jungle dweller, went away.

"It's half past eight. Can I prevail upon you to stay for dinner?"

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"That's exceedingly kind of you," said Finigan. "But the Dawsons asked me to Kalapani."

"What a popular chap you are!"

"Some say," Finigan said.

Timbala laughed. "The Dawsons are a delightful couple. In fact, old boy, the one bright gleam among my not exactly world-shattering set of neighbours. Pray don't quote me. You hadn't met them before?"

"No, Your Highness," Finigan said. "Dawson seems a nice chap. And I must say she is one of the easiest items on the eye I ever saw."

"Yes," said Timbala. "Duncan is a splendid fellow. But Celia—her beauty and repose. She reminds me of something I never did quite know, and couldn't express it, if I did. A deathless quality, all the life of woman, and yet—" He stopped, abruptly it seemed.

"I see what you mean," said Finigan. A bit high-flown, he thought. Well, they were all like that. He walked on, and up two steps into the air-conditioned room.

"You and I," Timbala said, and he chuckled. "Birds of a feather, eh?"

Finigan turned. He did not answer because, in turning, he had done a criminally clumsy thing. His elbow had brushed a tall vase on the table beside the door. He saw it start to topple, and he jumped to save it. Finigan was a fast mover, not so fast as the Maharaja, whose hand was there a split second before his, and Timbala held the vase; and only the ebony-and-silver cane fell clattering to the floor. There was silence, but for the hum of air-conditioning.

The Maharaja stared at him, nostrils arched wide and pale, upper lip trembling. Then he looked at the vase, predominantly blue, holding it in both hands, and he said quietly, "Ming three-colour. Is it not exquisite?"

"Your Highness," Finigan said, "I do apologise. What a clumsy idiot I am! You said, 'Birds of a feather,' and I was turning, and . . ." He shook his head. A narrow shave, indeed, although he might have been quick enough to save the vase, had Timbala not been quicker.

He watched Timbala put back his treasure. Finigan picked up the cane and gave it to him.

Timbala limped ahead and opened the door and said, "Never mind, old boy. All's well." He patted Finigan's shoulder once. He was a civilised, indulgent man. They went together.

"Perfectly hideous, isn't it?" he said about the public apartments of his palace.

"What I should do is close up the whole shebang, and find myself a bijou residence in Darjeeling or Kalimpong. I thought of that, but now of course, with this blasted leg of mine, the hills are impossible. Tell me, Mr. Finigan—" he paused, while his heels and the cane went clip and clop and tap on the marble floor—

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" are you burdened with houses and such possessions here or in Ireland? "

" No," said Finigan. " Not here or in Ireland or anywhere. Footloose is what I am, Your Highness."

Timbala laughed. " It must have many compensations." He was serious again. " To be tied to a place can be burdensome in numerous ways. Here, for example, we all have a shadow over us at present. Or two shadows, to be precise—the lesser one of the tiger; the larger one, for people like us, of these diabolical murders. You must have heard of them? "

" I read about them," Finigan said. He was much interested.

" *Who next?* is in everybody's mind. And can you wonder? I've even taken to locking my own door at night. But the planters are the people that I feel for. Isolated, every one of them—tied to their gardens. Oh true, they can send their wives to the hills or home. But this sort of menace makes the best women all the more determined to stick it out. I was noticing the strain in them this evening."

" So was I," said Finigan.

" Even that rock of Gibraltar, Duncan Dawson. Yes, even him. Well, I don't wonder. Take my advice, old boy, and bolt every door and window at the rest-house while you sleep. Oh, I know that you're an intrepid fellow; but you should take precautions."

" I will," said Finigan. " I'm a cautious fellow, not intrepid. But they seem odd, these murders. Have the police no clues? "

" None that I know of," said the Maharaja. " No clues, and little clue, if you ask me. There seems to be no motive; but that is a pointer in itself. It points to fanaticism. And where does fanaticism flourish? Across the borders of East Pakistan, a few miles away. That's where the murderer comes from in my opinion, for what it's worth. Ah well, no good letting things get us down. All we can do is be calm and vigilant."

They had reached the main entrance. There were fountains, but the fountains did not play.

" I shouldn't have let you walk so far," said Finigan.

" A trifling discomfort, and worth while. I meet so few people from the old and carefree days." Timbala sighed. " Good night then, and good luck, old boy."

Finigan drove down. He was pleased with himself. He thought he had established cordial relations. He had obtained the help he needed. He had also obtained some information, despite nearly blotting his copybook with that vase.

The half moon was up, dull in haze; but it gave fair light. The main road ran east and west below the hills. He could drive three miles east, crossing the river by the bridge; turn right, which was south, and take the private road to Kalapani Tea Estate. In the monsoon that would be the only road, for the rains were great, and half this country flooded.

But Dawson had told him a shorter way, cutting south-east

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across the angle. It was a jungle road, but smooth enough. Finigan drove at fifty through the forest in the night. No animals moved. Finigan sweated, sticking to the seat. They say sciatica is a damnably painful and crippling thing, he thought. And then he thought that after this dusty drive, he would hardly be looking his most beautiful for that attractive Mrs. Dawson.

The land began to drop. He saw the river bed, pale in the moon. He shifted to four-wheel drive, dipped his lights, and crossed the ford. Finigan stopped beyond. He left the engine running and lights on. He took the rifle and torch with him. Had that been? It seemed a tiny chance. But the banks were of rock upstream and down, cliffs thirty feet high. This was the natural crossing-place.

Finigan's eye had told him right. In the soft sand at the water's edge there was a fresh set of tracks, the four pugmarks of an old male tiger. One of them, the off hind pug, was shallower than the rest. The lame tiger of Timbala spared that foot.

Finigan got back into the jeep. No scent at all. And now, by a sudden fluke, a breast-high scent. But with reservations—he did not know this tiger yet. It was a guess about the pugmarks. Ask Budloo in the morning.

Finigan drove on to Kalapani. "A million apologies," he said. "Timbala kept me."

"It's a cold supper, anyway," she said. "We knew we would be late." It was an excellent cold supper. Finigan ate largely and paid large compliments.

"You should taste the Maharaja's food," said Celia Dawson.

"The poverty of riches," Finigan said. "That's a study on its own. As a matter of fact," he said thoughtfully, to guide conversation, "I'm sorry for that chap."

"Yes," said Dawson. "Unemployed and unacceptable in this India. Selling his treasures bit by bit, even if they're still worth a fortune. By our standards, he lives in the utmost luxury. By his, he slums it. I blame ourselves a lot. We sheltered the princes in feudal splendour; then we ditched them—or circumstances ditched them."

"I don't think he wants sympathy," said Celia Dawson. "I think he's quite resigned and even happy the way things are. 'My dear Celia,' he said this evening. 'I live by silver spoon from jewelled hand to mouth.' Talking of jewels," she said, "what wouldn't I give for that emerald!"

"Talking of jewels," said Finigan. "My little Irish mother, do you know what she said one time to me? 'Marcus, me darlin',' she said one time. 'Never accept a woman's precious gift. That's a cheap thing for a boy to be after doing. Besides, he always pays for it before Christmas.'

"Talking of the cost of life, Mrs. Dawson," Finigan said—full of food and drink and extravagance—"I was thinking if my ship came home, I might be taking a trip to America. Now would it be expensive there?"

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"Well," she said. "The best things are never cheap, as your Irish mother told you."

Finigan laughed. She had wit, this woman. "I could lecture," he said, "to make ends meet. I could lecture on tigers from coast to coast until I attained my heavenly object."

"What would your heavenly object be?"

"A wife," he said simply. "Some buxom, healthy, American girl with a nice round figure of, say, ten million to take to my bosom, to keep me in comfort and peace and quiet with a baker's dozen of baby Finigans. How does that sound? Too much to ask?"

"Quite a lot to ask, and not so quiet."

They went upstairs and sat on a verandah. They drank coffee and liqueurs. The fan whirled overhead. There was a steady din at the workers' lines—cymbals, rattles, voices, drums.

"Is that organised?" asked Finigan.

"The men take turns. We've armed them, too."

"How many has it killèd at Kalapani?"

"Twelve in this past year: five men, four women, and three children."

"There's the father of one of them," said Celia. A man moved to the centre of the lawn below. He was a tall man, a black-bearded Sikh, carrying a rifle across his body. He slipped through moonlight to stand in shadow. Impressive, Finigan thought.

"A child of his killed?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "His daughter, the same age as our Caroline. They were friends."

"Sohan Singh was my orderly in the regiment," said Duncan Dawson. "Now a night watchman."

No histrionics. Finigan liked these people. There were strains of sentiment in Marcus Finigan, battened down long ago. Five and four and three make twelve. He needed another victim—number thirteen, here or somewhere, to break the arithmetical progression. To kill, he must have killing. Years of this had left its mark on Finigan. He was ruthless beyond the measure of a decent chap, a soldier, officer, and gentleman.

"I saw fresh tracks tonight," Finigan said. "Not positive, but I think so." He told Dawson where.

"That points in our direction." Dawson made no move. He knew, as Finigan knew, that nothing could be done. He also knew the argument about the greatest good of the greatest number. He shrank from it, which Finigan did not. "It's lame," he said, "but not sore-lame. That's half the trouble. The damned animal can move ten miles a night."

"I must be going," Finigan said, and did not move. Good hosts had to offer nightcaps. He looked across the lawn, and over tea bushes on parade, and graceful siris trees, and to the hills. A breeze came down from there. It was not cool; but it was less sultry, arid, stifling.

"Have one for the road," said Duncan.

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" Well, a last drop," Finigan said. " Perhaps I will." Duncan went for it. " Your child? " he said. " Is she at home? "

" Yes," she said. " With Duncan's parents. Which is a relief at present. Also a good thing because Caroline was quite shattered about . . . about . . ." Celia shook her head.

The last drink came. " You must be thankful for Sohan Singh," said Finigan. " I mean, with the murders to add to your complications. He looks as if he could squeeze a nifty trigger. Are you sure of him, Duncan? "

" As sure as I am of my erring wife." Duncan put his hand over hers, and they looked at each other. He took his hand away.

Finigan saw that exchange of comfort. He envied it. " Timbala seems to think that the murderer crosses from East Pakistan. There's no motive, he says, and that points to fanaticism."

" Apart from fanaticism," Duncan said, " and I doubt that, rather, the only motive I can see would be a sort of general grudge against authority—someone who thinks he has suffered injustice. But the police have their fingers completely on that kind of pulse. And their mode of questioning is apt to produce results. No, I suppose Timbala might be right."

" It worries him a lot," said Celia. " They put him on the shelf, but he still feels responsible in a way for anything that happens in Timbala. That's why he keeps needling the police. And why he's been so wonderfully kind. The Thomsons, for instance—they were the planters who were murdered—had a son of fourteen at home. Tim has paid all his schooling for four years. He did much the same thing for the police Inspector's wife."

" Yes," said Dawson. " He's a generous chap."

Finigan stood to go. " Good night, you two, and many thanks."

" Come again," she said, " any time. You bring gusts of fresh air to a belea—to a benighted couple in the hot weather. Good night, Marcus."

Beleaguered, she had been going to say, thought Finigan. And it was true. Whose turn next?

" I have to go away for a couple of days," said Dawson rapidly on the way downstairs, " before the monsoon makes the roads impassable—to inspect two of our other Company gardens. I can't take Celia in this heat, and she flatly refuses to go to Darjeeling. If you're still here at the end of the week, will you keep an eye on her for me? "

" I can think of worse penances," said Finigan, and Dawson laughed.

" There's Timbala, of course," he said. " But his eye is just possibly a little too much on already."

Finigan drove away. He thought—among more pressing thoughts—that Duncan Dawson was not quite as guileless a man as he might seem.

" Sahib," said Budloo in the morning at the river. " These are the tracks of the budmash, of the bad one. But the budmash

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passed by early in the night. It is now far away from here."

"Why, Budloo? Is there not deep jungle between us and Kalapani?"

"An old tiger shuns this place and has that favourite haunt. Here is not pleasing to the budmash." Budloo waved his hand at the river bank on the Kalapani side. It was a hilly jungle of tall grass, withered now; of the broad-leaved teak; of rock and scrub and gully.

The expert had spoken. He was probably right, but Finigan wondered. The jungle people knew far more than he knew, but they did not work from logic and logical possibility. They worked from intuition and experience, which make for prejudice. He took local advice, but with a grain of salt.

"Come then, wise one," Finigan said, and Budloo chuckled, and they walked over to the shade where Dani and her mahout waited.

They moved east that morning—from the Kalapani River, and through the jungle that did not please this tiger; through the impeccable neatness of Kalapani tea garden; and were four miles beyond when news of the hundred-and-forty-fourth kill arrived.

The tiger had killed a woman at dawn at a village still farther to the east.

Finigan drove there in the jeep. He sat in a shelter of thorns from four-thirty that evening until six-thirty the following morning.

The tiger did not come. It would not come again.

Finigan let them have the remains of the body for cremation, which was overdue.

He slept a few hours. He and Sharma met alone at a jungle crossing. "Where's your bodyguard?" he demanded.

"Surely *you* are not mankiller," Sharma said. "Am I not safe with the great Finigan Nimrod? I am not a woman after all, God knows." Then he talked in earnest. "Someone must know something. In India someone always knows. You understand them. You are not tarred with government brush. Listen, then, Marcus."

Marcus Finigan sought the man-eating tiger of Timbala. He also had an interest in the search for the other killer of Timbala. The tiger had vanished. The other killer did not strike again.

"Sahib," said Budloo on the sixth morning, as they rested, "the tiger is brightly coloured. Is this not so?"

"This is so, most wise and venerable one," said Finigan.

Budloo did not chuckle today at Finigan's compliment. "Yet of the animals, the bright, brave tiger is the hardest one to see."

"This is so," said Finigan. It might be so.

"All my life I have lived with the janwar, with the wild things in the jungle," Budloo said. "I have seen strange tigers and strange things." Budloo philosophised no more about camouflage or whatever strange things he meant, if any. The cryptic little man seemed troubled.

It was nine o'clock. Heat shimmered from rocks and sand. Budloo sniffed. "There will be small rains," he said. There

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were no clouds yet; but in such knowledge Budloo was infallible.

"We have hunted overmuch," said Finigan. "We are not wild dogs, able to run a quarry to exhaustion. It is time for rest and patience, Budloo. As the earth waits for rain, so must we wait for the budmash. Therefore let us rest today, and tomorrow we will meet with Dani in the morning early."

Finigan named a place to the east, in Budloo's favourite direction, eight miles from the Kalapani River. He yawned. "Sleep well, wise Budloo, and alone."

Budloo cackled, much flattered by this admonition. Finigan made a show of starting for the rest-house, waited behind cover, and watched the elephant out of sight. Then he drove to Kalapani, where Celia Dawson gave him late breakfast. Dawson had left that morning.

"What time does Sohan Singh come on?"

"At five," she said. Her eyes had moved quickly at his question. Only that betrayed her tenseness.

"I'll be back this evening," Finigan said. "And listen, Celia! If anyone asks, I'm having a good, long sleep. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said she. "Is there some secret about this sleep?"

"None that I wouldn't gladly share," he said. "Good-bye then, beautiful."

She watched him go. There was an earthy force about Marcus Finigan, a comfort in danger, and dangerous.

Finigan hid the jeep. He had grown to like old Budloo, but there was an odd blank spot in Budloo's mind.

He searched that jungle in the heat of noon. It was sweaty weather, and a nasty job, and Finigan sweated. Yes, the tiger had been here, and it had crossed the river to the west.

Finigan slept two hours. He stripped, rolled in the tepid Kalapani, put on fresh drill from a zipper bag, combed his black locks to glistening order, ate sandwiches, drank tea, and drove back the way he had come. It was after five. In the south, the clouds were black, and thunder trembled. Budloo's small rains were coming.

Another car was outside the Dawson's house, a green Rolls-Royce tourer, a vast and splendid old motor carriage, with silver spotlights a foot in diameter at each end of the windshield. The Maharaja had come to call.

Finigan parked the jeep behind it, like a minesweeper anchored astern of a battleship. They would be through in the garden, he supposed.

Finigan went up the steps.

"Salaam, sahib," said Sohan Singh, appearing silently, rifle under arm like someone after pheasants. "Ap-ke mi jaz kaise hain? How is your health?"

"Salaam, sirdar-ji," Finigan said. "My health is good."

"Sahib, we pray that you may kill this tiger."

"I will do that," said Finigan. He looked at Sohan Singh. "I wish that I had come soon enough to prevent your sorrow."

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"A son is a father's pride," said Sohan Singh. He glanced through the house to the garden beyond, and back to Finigan. "But a daughter is a man's dearest comfort."

"This I can understand," said Finigan. He went through, and out to the garden, where the Maharaja and Celia had been having tea. But Timbala was leaving.

"Ah, look who's here!" he said. "How do things progress?"

"Badly, Your Highness," Finigan said. "It's one of the most damnably elusive brutes I ever was up against."

"'That demmed, elusive Pimpernel,'" quoted Timbala absently. "Well," he said, "if anyone in India can get it, you're the man. Is old Budloo being a help?"

"A great help," Finigan said. "But I called a halt this morning to catch up on much-needed sleep. We're meeting again tomorrow early." He waved his hand eastwards. "If the rain comes, then we may find tracks to bear out my hunch that the tiger is somewhere over there." Finigan yawned. "I came to scrounge a drink off Celia. Then home to bed again."

Celia stood up. "Thank you so much, Tim," she said, holding a folder of music. "I'll start learning it this evening."

"I brought Celia the score of my sonata. I'm rather pleased with it—a poor thing, but mine own."

"A fine thing, I would think," she said. "That last movement is terrific."

He bowed, not ironically. There was a rhythm of dignity to anything Timbala did. They walked round the house. He patted the Rolls-Royce. "Boanerges," he said. "My true old friend. We have travelled far together.

"Well, cheerio," he said blithely, and perhaps incongruously. It was only in colloquialisms that Timbala's English sometimes seemed a little askew or overdone. He raised his left hand from the wheel, and the Emerald of Timbala caught the sun. The Rolls sailed off with a faint fuss of tyres, slowly to the gate, then faster.

Finigan watched the dust-cloud billow at high speed along the Timbala road.

"He's so kind," Celia said. "And so entertaining, even if he does rather tend to fix me with those soulful eyes. A small peg, Marcus?"

"Well," he said. "Shall we say a peg?"

Finigan hung back. "Oh brother," he muttered. "How will you guard the house tonight?"

"From the garden. This is best when the moon is full."

"And with rain noisy on the metal roof, and thunder?"

"Then I will be upstairs, outside the door. Sahib, the memsahib's life is my life."

"That I know," breathed Finigan, "but the danger is great. Now keep this secret: I go to the jungle between us and the ford of the Kalapani River. If I do not return by daylight, send men in search of me. Is this understood?"

"It is understood. God be with you."

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Finigan had his drink. "I must be going," he said. Always going, and going alone. The risks and the rewards were greater. Finigan, gambler, had followed hunches all his life, and often been wrong.

"A few instructions," he said now. "Go upstairs as soon as it's dark. Have your dinner brought up on a tray. Are there shutters in your room?"

"The windows are snibbed," she said. "We have a small air-conditioner." Celia frowned. Thunder was rumbling, and the sun had almost set. "Why so much alarmist fuss?" Her eyes flickered to him and away again. "Besides," she said, "the piano's downstairs; I want to practise Tim's sonata."

"Not tonight," he said.

"Who are you to boss me around?" she said irritably.

"Boss's boss," he said. "You do what I tell you, or else . . ." Finigan smacked his outsize hands together so loudly that she jumped—and the Abdar came running to take orders for more drinks.

"It was nothing," she said. "Only Finigan Sahib." The Abdar smiled about that mad, latently deadly, best narrator of unprintable stories, Finigan. He went away. "You're such an awful bear of a man," she said. "I wouldn't put it past you.

"Good night," she said, and smiled about him, and went upstairs in accordance with orders.

Finigan waited near the ford. Sand-flies bothered him. He sat below a rock. His back was protected, and he would be in shadow if the moon came out. But there were no shadows now, for the storm was on its way. The cliffs were black and the sand was white and the river was sliding past—flash, vivid and macabre; blind darkness; flash again. Thunder engulfed any noises there might have been.

But he heard the wind, and the wind arrived, and the rain came with it, gouts and oceans of blessed rain. Finigan crouched below his rock. He was cool at last. He had not been cool for months. Inaccurate, he remembered. He had been cool briefly in Timbala's air-conditioned room.

It was a small storm, a precursor of the great storms of the monsoon. It poured two or three inches of rain in twenty minutes, and rolled on to the hills. Lightning and thunder dwindled. After the first rain, and before the turkish bath—this coolness was active bliss, perfection, pleasure.

The moon came out. The sand-flies had been drowned or blown away. A mosquito arrived. Anopheles? There were no puddles in the sand; the parched earth had gulped that water in. There were puddles in Finigan's jungle boots which might be noisy, so he raised his feet to let the puddles out.

Apart from this essential movement, Finigan remained still before, during, and after the storm. His eyes did swivel to the slither of a snake—a cobra, he thought. The dark snake looped

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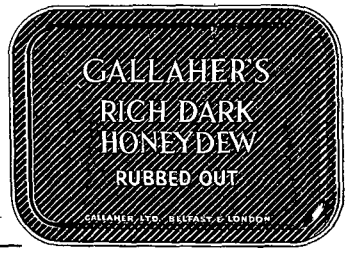

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gracefully on its way and about its business—hunting, perhaps; flooded out of home, perhaps. It swam the Kalapani River, and climbed the sand to the gap in low, black cliffs beyond.

After that nothing happened. The river came sliding past. It had risen a little.

Marcus Finigan nursed his small-calibre, ultra-high velocity, double-barrelled rifle—not a beginner's toy, but a great expert's handy weapon. He watched the ford, which happened to be the only convenient crossing-place on this four-mile stretch of the Kalapani. Some sort of geological fault, he supposed, that broke the cliffs and shallowed the river. Whatever the cause, snakes, tigers, men—any earthbound thing must cross this way.

True, they might clamber down, and swim, and clamber up, and struggle through broken jungle—they might do that at other places. But not if they had urgent business to complete. Finigan's mind played with fancies—Hannibal's elephants crossing the Alps, all the strategic bottlenecks—while he waited at this place.

But nothing came. The shadows of the moon lay north, upriver, away from him; and that meant midnight. The air was washed clean of dust and smoke. The hills were sharp.

But no tiger came.

Finigan saw movement in the shadows at the gap. It was a man who came down to wade the Kalapani River. He wore a loincloth. The water surged about his knees. He stopped at this side to put on boots or shoes. He glanced up and downriver once. He moved again, at a limber, purposeful walk up sloping sand to the eastern gap in the black cliffs of the Kalapani, Blackwater, River.

Finigan followed. Fool! he thought. I should have worn shorts. He dealt with that problem. He followed in shirt and pants. He reached the gap. He watched from shadow. He saw the man move in shadow on the jungle road. Stillness in shadow—invisible. But movement was visible. Finigan was sure that he himself had not been seen. He had the advantage; he could follow movement; and check when that movement ceased. But he must keep up. Where now?

The man had left the jungle track. Finigan knew where, for he had left it at that nullah earlier today, or not today, but yesterday. The tiger's tracks had come down that nullah, and Finigan had gone up it. Since then, a storm had washed all tracks away.

Finigan reached the place, a sunken sandy lane, climbing off to the right from the jungle road. The print of rubber soles on rain-firmed sand went up the nullah. He followed.

He caught one glimpse of the man in moonlight at a bend. After that, he did not see him, but the track went on, half a mile or so already—and still those tracks climbed. He could see them fifty feet ahead. So long as the tracks continued . . .

"Drop it!" said the voice.

Finigan dropped it. A blunt, hard jab in the small of the back had prompted him.

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"Clasp your hands above your head."

Finigan did so. His famous slow-beating heart went pit-a-pat. He reviled himself.

"*Take a pace forward.*"

Finigan did so. Is now when I get it? Finigan wondered. But the rifle was being collected.

"That's *much* better," said the Maharaja of Timbala. "Walk on, old boy." Finigan walked on.

"Marcus Finigan with his trousers down. Quite funny, don't you agree?"

Not so funny, Finigan thought. Could I . . .? But the muzzle nudged his spine.

"I asked you a question."

"Very funny indeed," said Marcus Finigan. Funny peculiar. "Look—"

"Don't worry," Timbala said. "I'm looking. I've been looking at you for hours and hours; since you emptied your boots, in fact. So elementary not to move."

"But why watch *me*? What is all this about?" Time, he needed. Time to think, to plan, to provoke, to flatter. Which or what?

"You will know quite soon," Timbala said. His voice was cordial and composed. "Take the left fork here."

Finigan took the left fork of the nullah. Now he knew where they were going. "If I'm supposed to be so dangerous," he said, "why didn't I shoot you at the river?"

"Because you had no particle of evidence against me. But I knew that you had suspicions, and I knew that a money-grubbing rogue of your sordid ilk would not impart suspicions to anyone without some evidence. So I decided to entice you on this walk."

It was unfortunately true that Finigan had not told a living soul, not even Sharma. "I'm glad your sciatica is better."

"My malade imaginaire. Knocking the Ming vase over—that was your first mistake. A clever little trick. Fools never seem to learn how fatal cleverness can be. Agreed?"

"Not entirely, Tim."

"Why not entirely, Mr. Finigan?"

"Because it was your cleverness in pretending to be a cripple that first put me on to you, and you're not a fool, or are you?"

The muzzle left his back, and something cracked Finigan's right hand on his cranium most painfully, the trigger finger. Finigan lurched, recovered. "You won't need that finger any more," Timbala said. "Be polite, and walk faster, would you mind?"

Finigan walked faster.

Blood trickled down his neck. Rudeness seemed to be a mistake, among many larger mistakes, the largest of which had been to underestimate this madman. Stark, staring, rational madmen—how do you deal with them?

"You'd better watch out," he said. "The tiger may be back."

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"You err again. The tiger lies up here between kills. It moves away to kill. It stays away two days at least. It left yesterday in the morning. Correct?"

"Correct that it left," said Finigan.

"That was another mistake of yours. I sent the faithful Budloo back. He saw you bathing in the river."

"But don't you want that animal killed?"

"Certainly; very soon, in fact, when it no longer serves my purpose—to discourage nocturnal wanderers."

"Your own wanderings," said Finigan. "Doesn't the tiger discourage them?"

"No," said the Maharaja. "I am not that timorous nincompoop, Finigan Sahib Bahadur."

Finigan's dirty temper stirred, and his brains were stirring to a plan at last. "Your Highness!" he said.

"Talk on, my dear fellow. Talk while you can."

"Old Budloo—is he with you in these mercy killings?"

Timbala laughed behind. "Mercy killings! Rather a good euphemism for revenge, old boy. Oh, heavens no! Budloo doesn't have a clue. He merely carries out my orders—which are to prevent the hunting of the tiger here. You and I are the only people who have a clue."

But Finigan thought that old Budloo might have a clue, might indeed have tried to impart a clue when he spoke enigmatically

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of the bright brave tiger being the hardest animal to see. Was not Sher Bahadur, Brave Tiger, one of Timbala's honorifics? Old Budloo might still love his prince, yet think him better dead.

And Finigan now knew that the madman had talked to no one.

"Sit on that stone. I fear I must ask you to keep your hands above your head."

Finigan sat. His hands and arms were tired. The trigger finger had stopped bleeding. It was broken. He did not see much hope.

He looked at a tangle of creepers and vines, a growth perhaps of centuries, the cave entrance almost covered, a platform of bricks before it, the well to one side.

Finigan had been here yesterday. The tiger used the cave.

"One of my ancestors," Timbala said, "became a holy man in middle age—slightly Maharaja style, I will admit. They had to go down two hundred feet to get him water. But here he lived and here he died. Who knows, I might do the same myself?

"I said to the faithful Budloo, 'No one is to hunt the tiger near my puja place. It is sacred.' Yes, perhaps I will renounce the world and die here."

Sooner than you think, hoped Finigan. "But those priceless treasures," he said. "How could you live without them?"

"I wouldn't," Timbala said. "Have you forgotten my Picasso?" He sat now between Finigan and the cave. He wore a khaki dhoti, a pair of jungle boots, a leather belt at his waist, with a big-handled knife in a curving scabbard, an empty pistol holster. On his left wrist was a watch. The Emerald of Timbala gleamed greenly on his left hand against the moon. The automatic in his right hand did not gleam. Finigan's precious rifle lay on the rock with the barrels pointed at their owner.

The Maharaja of Timbala's torso would have done credit to a light-heavyweight in prime condition. The contrast to his usual appearance might have seemed absurd if he had seemed less deadly. "The moon is wonderfully bright," he said. "I haven't had a moon like this for months."

I, I, my, my. The moon was above Timbala's left shoulder. Finigan looked at the mountains and the craters of old moon's leering face. He looked back at Timbala's face, aquiline in shadow, black eyes in shadow. If I, Finigan thought . . .

"I wouldn't, old boy," Timbala said.

"I was thinking," Finigan said. Am I right? he thought. Was that the start of it?

"Really?" Timbala smiled his charming smile, which so flatly and weirdly contradicted the man, the maniac, the implication of the voice: is it possible for you to think?

"I've often thought the British have a lot to answer for." How did Duncan Dawson say it? "They sheltered the princes in feudal splendour; then they ditched them." Finigan watched the face. Time the only hope; talk the only hope for time.

The smile was gone. The mouth opened. The breath hissed in.

Got him! Finigan thought. Now quick! "Tell me, Your

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Highness," he said respectfully. "Did you feel bitter after Independence?"

"Bitter?" The face contorted. "Do you know who I am? I am the last Prince of two millenniums. We were not conquered. We made treaty with the British Raj. And what did they do to me? Left me to the mercy of my so-called countrymen, soft, fat, upstart banias . . ."

"Tell me," said Finigan carefully. "How did you come to decide on personal revenge? That's the unique and fascinating thing."

"Time is short," said Timbala quietly; his quiet self again. He flicked his left wrist in front of his eyes and down. He did not give a vestige of a chance, raving or quiet.

"Just after two," he said. "A few minutes yet. I have a busy night ahead. No, please don't! If you move a muscle, I shall shoot you dead. Which would be sooner rather than later, but life is precious, is it not? Now listen!"

Finigan listened to the story of bitterness against the Imperial power and the Indian power. The man spoke lucidly, coherently, of grievance, of grievance fading into resignation, and resignation into melancholy, and melancholy into a refuge that was beauty—his jade, his paintings, and his porcelain—the recipient of beauty. And then his discovery—the beauty that he made himself—his music.

The voice was resonant in the rocky place below the cave.

"I began my sonata. It was to be the story of our splendour and our eclipse. The first great movement wrote itself. Look at me, Mr. Finigan!"

"I'm looking and listening, Your Highness." Had he heard something then?

"The second movement came as easily—the adagio of the Prince betrayed, all lost but beauty. But the third, what would it be? What would my finale be?"

Finigan's ears were sharp, and never more desperately sharp than now, and he had heard another sound behind, beyond the mad Maharaja of Timbala.

"Then my true genius grasped me. From the bottom of the pit my genius sprang to take me by the heart, to take me by the throat, as in a minute now . . . Sit still, you mongrel Irishman! My genius bore me to the storm, the tempest of my victory. And then I knew. Only then at the climax of my music's triumph did I know. The plans of my genius were full-born. I went that night and killed the wretched planter-people. My vengeance had begun. First stroke, against the British relics, not very worthy specimens, I'm afraid. What *was* their name?"

"Thomson, wasn't it?" said Finigan.

The eyes appraised him. "You have made quite a study of these executions."

"Only casually," said Finigan. "People talk of nothing else."

"Of course," Timbala said, appeased. "Yes, of course."

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"What about the chokidar?" asked Finigan.

"Oh, he got in my way," Timbala said. "I rather think that Sikh may do the same tonight."

Finigan did not dare to turn his eyes to the right, below the moon. He looked at Timbala's eyes.

"My second execution was that Congress wallah here from Delhi. I slit his fat, political throat with gusto. Thus, my two main accounts were settled." Timbala stirred. "Now time is up."

"I don't see how the Commissioner came into it," said Finigan.

"The Administration," said Timbala. "Anybody's faithful lackey. There was a personal feeling there, I do confess. He patronised me, and that I do not tolerate, either from glorified babu or mongrel Irish."

I'll mongrel-Irish you, thought Finigan. *Some kind of a stir again. In withered grass? Of a snake in grass?* Keep talking. Keep him talking.

"That still leaves the policeman," Finigan said.

"He was expediency again. I met him at my private exit from the palace. That cliff is honeycombed, you know. I thought he seemed suspicious. I followed him to less compromising ground. I was sorry, really. But afterwards I thought, Anglo-Indian, sad chee-chee mixture of my enemies. Poetic justice. He deserved it."

"What next?" Finigan's voice cracked high and loud, and that movement stopped in the corner of his eye; yes, definitely.

"Panic-stricken!" said Timbala. "I thought better of you than that. Well, I shall be merciful, old boy." The muzzle pointed, steady as a rock, at Marcus Finigan. The fingers of the left hand, three bare fingers and one jewelled finger, slipped graphically across the Maharaja's throat. "You will hardly feel it. A spout, a gurgle, and that is that. Then pop you go, down to the bottom of my well. Which is rather a nuisance, actually, because you will pollute my well. But never mind; a year or two of life in an apology for the manner to which I am accustomed, selling my precious things—then here to contemplate my precious things, my genius, and my vengeance. By then the well should be clean again of Irish mongrel."

"Why do you say mongrel?" asked Finigan politely.

"No personal reflection. You're mongrels, all of you, old boy. I see things differently. From the dawn of man my blood is pure. Do you understand?"

"Oh, quite," said Finigan. "Even if they do say that we're all twenty-somethingth cousins—Hindus, Irish, Hottentots, and good old Eskimos."

Which was impolitic. The nostrils spread. The muscles of the right hand tightened.

"When will your vengeance be complete?" Finigan asked with haste, and a tingle of the spine.

"It is complete. I shall not kill the lovely Celia for vengeance."

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" Why then, Your Highness? "

" She loved my sonata. That was the first time I thought of this. She will have learnt the score by now. She plays well, you know. The perfect woman shares my triumph. So alive; so ripe and beautiful for death."

" I don't quite get the point," said Finigan. And yet he could peer into the workings of this exploded brain. There was a dreadful logic to understand. Finigan had to risk his neck. He glanced at the jolly moon, and fleetingly down and back. " Moon's getting low," he said.

" Look at me! Here is the reason: Celia, the true American, wedded India and England. I, the true Aryan, wedded India and England. I was sacrificed." The maniac laughed merrily. " See the point, old boy? "

" If you call me old boy just once again," said Finigan, " I shall scream. You sound like a parody of Colonel Blimp." He knew what was coming. *Somehow, anyhow, he must gain time against that coming.*

" Scream? " Timbala stared at him. The nostrils were dilated. The upper lip was twitching. The moment was very near. " Yes, for that I will make you scream. Colonel Blimp! You think, because I went to Oxford, because I talk, because of my music, because I . . . I, I, the Spirit of India; I, Sher Bahadur, Brave Tiger, Maharaja of Timbala! " The left hand drew the knife.

Here we are, thought Finigan. He stared the monster out. He must not flinch. Movement would trip the trigger in that brain. *And in another feline brain.* Make him move!

" Better watch out, Brave Tiger," Finigan said. " The Tiger of Timbala is behind you."

But the madman screamed, " I am the Tiger of Timbala! I, I, I! " and did not turn. The Tiger of Timbala charged from the rocks beyond Timbala's shoulder; and then the man moved at last, and Finigan could move.

The bright tiger took its victim at a limping gallop.

Finigan had the rifle. He used his second finger twice. Victim a hundred and forty-five lay dead. The Tiger of Timbala thrashed about and lay dead in the clearing below the moon. Marcus Finigan seemed to be alive.

" We heard the shots. Did you kill the tiger? "

" Yes," he said. " I killed the tiger."

" You're in a terrible mess. Are you all right, Marcus? "

" O.K.," he said. " First, I want a strong, neat snort. Then I want someone to press my clothes while I have a bath. Then I want a champion breakfast." Finigan's index finger was hurting him; the backlogs of sleep were clamouring. Otherwise, he felt wonderful, and Mrs. Dawson in a négligé looked wonderful. " That'll do for a first instalment of my wants," he said.

" You're a very explicit man in wants," she said, and smiled at him, and went to attend to the first of his wants.

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There was shocking news that must be told. "Thank you," Finigan said, taking the glass. He turned away. The moon had set. He looked at the stars of the Indian night and told her about the Maharaja of Timbala.

"I wondered," she said in a while. "I wondered why that music haunted me, and the look on his face when he played that night, and the way he stared when I asked him for it. And then last evening, after he had gone, and you had gone, and you were such a dictator, and so mysterious with Sohan Singh—well, then the idea suddenly hit me, and I thought, It can't be true; then I thought, Supposing it could be true? So I worked it out in my head all night until it made the most dreadful sense, except for one thing: what possessed him to play the sonata to us, and lend it to me?"

"Conceit possessed him," Finigan said. "The maniac has to boast. That's why I'm still alive and kicking, fool that I was and am."

"Once I saw," she said, "I saw it all—even the mad logic that put me on the list. Is that true, Marcus?"

"True," he said, and left it at that. He looked down at the warm, live woman in his care.

Finigan felt strongly warm and live himself. "Bath!" he said loudly, before the spirit weakened.

A broken finger was nothing much, but it was Finigan's most important finger. Celia applied a temporary splint. They breakfasted on the upstairs verandah. The sun was not yet high enough to spoil the freshness of the first morning after the year's first rain. The snows were showing in the north.

"Well," said Finigan, "time to say thank you and good-bye."

"You're the most restless, nomadic creature. What's the hurry now?"

"I can't wait to collect my just rewards, and book passage to America."

"So you weren't joking the other night?"

"Joking?" he said. "My heavenly object is a sacred subject. And how will I ever attain it when all the best wives are wives already?" Finigan sighed.

She laughed. "You produce more corn than all the State of Kansas."

"Kansas," he mused. "Would that be the rich place I was hearing of?"

"I think you mean Texas," Celia said.

"Big fortunes there?" asked Finigan blandly.

"Astronomical," she said.

"Jewels and tiaras?"

"Constellations of them." But Celia stared at him. "Oh, you devil! I wondered why you were even more pleased with yourself than usual. Do let me have a peek."

Finigan let her have a peek. "Are you a girl who can keep a secret, even from Duncan?"

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"My first," she said. "But I can, I guess."

Finigan stood. The longer he remained, the less he would feel like leaving. He looked round. Nobody in sight. He grasped Celia Dawson powerfully and kissed her well. "Tell Duncan I kept a virtuous eye on you against my better judgment. Good-bye, beautiful."

"Good-bye," she said. "Dear Marcus, awful man."

The awful Finigan went on his way to collect lesser rewards and be out of reach before awkward questions might arise.

The Emerald of Timbala—his rightful, if illegal, spoil of war—was in his pocket. He was sure that nobody, except the U.S. Customs, could possibly pin it on him. The Lone Star State was the rightful home for such a heavenly object.

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SOLUTIONS to ONE FOR THE ROAD on page 22

1. *i. widgeon; ii. hounds; iii. rhinoceroses; iv. kangaroos.*
2. *Up.*
3. *All Prime Ministers—Palmerston, Disraeli, Churchill.*
4. *a. Stretch of sea off Scotland; b. Arab slave-route; c. Jacobite rising; d. novel by Dumas; e. 48 Preludes and Fugues by J. S. Bach.*
5. *The Remedy of a coin is the small margin by which it may vary from the required standard and weight.*
6. *Spontaneous combustion of waste coal in mines; in Scots Law, part of man's estate that he may leave as he pleases.*
7. *The Mocking-bird and the Hoopoe.*
8. *Furrowed; given to writing; chisel-shaped; adapted for climbing; boat-shaped.*
9. *According to psychologists the qualities associated with the figures are:*

   △ = *intellect* ○ = *sex* □ = *love of security*

   ∿ = *imagination*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Archaeologist.* 8, *Matin.* 9, *A bend.* 11, *Chemist.* 12, *Lady.* 14, *Senna.* 17, *Tell.* 18, *Camaraderie.* 19, *Aeon.* 21, *Ephod.* 24, *Fret.* 28, *Eclipse.* 29, *Elate.* 30, *Acorn.* 31, *Peregrination.*

Down. 2, *Rotund.* 3, *Hence.* 4, *Effete.* 5, *Lotion.* 6, *Grate.* 7, *Steppe.* 8, *Millionaire.* 10, *Declaration.* 13, *Yearn.* 14, *Space.* 15, *Neath.* 16, *A bead.* 17, *Thief.* 20, *Old age.* 22, *Palmer.* 23, *Oppugn.* 25, *Rococo.* 26, *Geese.* 27, *Least.*

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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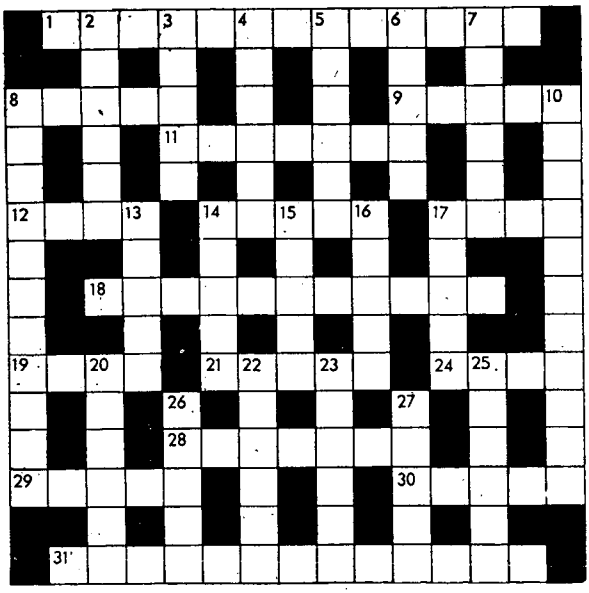
Solution on Page 143



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CLUES

Across

1 Digger, but no Aussie (13).

8 Mother can in morning service (5).

9 Dangerous curve to go on ? (1, 4).

11 He's in the drug market (7).

12 The boy, a Yeoman, and his girl (4).

14 Purgative pod (5).

17 You never can (4).

18 Focus on mateyness (11).

19 Wholly or partially, a long time (4).

21 There's a trough in Biblical surplice (5).

24 Chafe on the fingerboard (4).

28 Celestial blackout (7).

29 Inspirit though ending in arrears (5).

30 Footsore nut ? (5).

31 Falcon's trip ends in race (13).

Down

2 Plump and half corrupt (6).

3 " ——, home, ye idle creatures;" (Shakespeare) (5).

4 Enfeebled partly by festival ? (6).

5 Cosmetic; I put a lot on (6).

6 Jarring fireplace (5).

7 Threshold of the Iron Curtain ? (6).

8 Sinatra said he didn't want to be one (11).

10 Of Independence, for example (11).

13 Desire sounds like compressed annual earnings (5).

14 Rocket and see it ! (5).

15 Beneath poetic usage (5).

16 Drawn, a slug (1, 4).

17 Set, to catch (5).

20 Dog ale ? Senility ! (3, 3).

22 Prestidigitator from Holy Land (6).

23 Oppose with crazy popgun (6).

25 Florid, sounds like boat-race drink (6).

26 Sentinels of Rome ? (5).

27 This is said to induce repair early (5).

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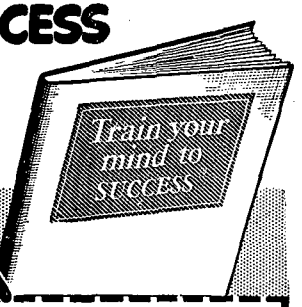

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